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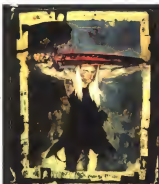
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COVER: For our first anniversary cover Bob Eggleton's War Dragon shows an evil skeletal warrior astride his deadly dragon. ABOVE: Chris Bunch's hero meets some mighty nasty adversaries on page 44. Art by Todd Lockwood.

REALMS OF FANTASY

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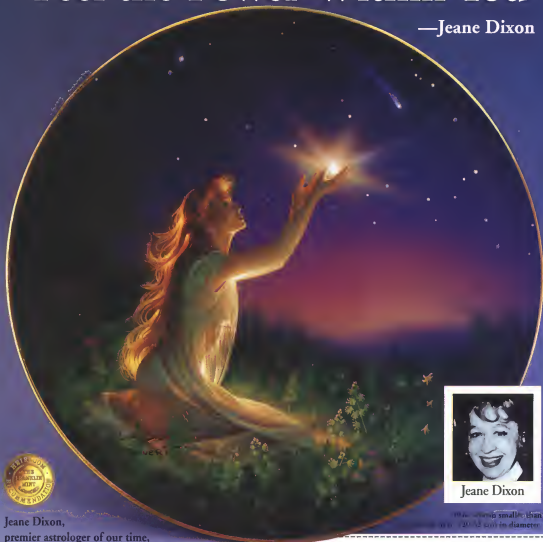
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"Feel the Power Within You"

—Jeane Dixon



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Dear Ms. McCarthy,

I subscribed to *Realms* as a wedding present for my husband. We have been married for almost eight months now and I dare say that your magazine goes everywhere with us, we enjoy it that much. A friend of ours is an artist and when she asked if we had a favorite type of painting we would like for a wedding present, we immediately turned to your magazine for examples. Of all the works that we showed her—Michael Whelan, Janny Wurts, Brian Froud—Thomas Canty was the one artist we agreed needed more of a spotlight.

My friends and I have collected his works for many years now. I started collecting in 1988 with the jacket cover of the *White Raven* by Diana Paxson. I even have a print of the *White Raven* signed by the artist, given to me as an engagement present. I am an avid reader of science fiction and fantasy and many times will pick up a book just because his art work is on the front cover.

I find many times that the front cover plays a big part in what the story is about, such as *Traitors* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch or the more recent publications of Michael Moorcock's *The Eternal Champions* series. It is also nice to see that publishers tend to keep Mr. Canty as the artist throughout a series of books such as Gael Baudino's *Elfian* series and Patricia Kennealy (Morrison's) *Keltiad* series. This makes it very easy to spot a long-awaited sequel.

I would be very interested and extremely delighted if *Realms* could interview Mr. Canty and perhaps even start a column devoted to the artists of science fiction and fantasy. And if *Realms* could persuade him to publish a collection of his works, I know that he'll have a market.

Thank you for your time and please keep up the great work. *Realms* has filled a big hole that other magazines can't even begin to cover.

Adrienne Amerman
Gaithersburg, Maryland

You must have been mightily pleased with the most recent issue! Hope it lived up to your expectations.

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

Thank you for showcasing Thomas Canty in the Gallery section of the August issue. I've long been a fan of his work, and I even have a Canty "mystery" story. Though I'm a longtime fan of his work, no one else I know is even vaguely interested in fantasy or fantasy art. Thus I've never been able to explain the package I received this past Christmas. A plain white envelope, postmarked 12/22/94 arrived at my office, my name snazzily printed on the envelope, as was the return address in Massachusetts. Inside was a

14" x 22" blueprint reproduction of the art I later saw on the cover of Lisa Goldstein's *Travellers in Magic*. But on top of the woman's head was a Santa cap, painted on the thin paper. And in the empty area to the left, printed in gold lettering was:

Dear Ms. Granston, I Hope That The Holidays And Coming New Year Are Wonderful For You. Best Wishes! Thomas Canty

I was shocked—and thrilled—beyond words. Twice I wrote to Mr. Canty at the return address on the envelope to try to discover who had arranged for me to receive the beautiful gift. At no avail. Mr. Canty (or whoever was at that address) never used the SASEs I'd enclosed. To this day it remains the most wonderful unexplained mystery of my life.

Lyn Granston

I most sincerely hope that the person who arranged that gift is reading these pages and will let you know his or her identity. If you should get to the bottom of the mystery, I hope you'll let me know. I'm terribly curious, and it wasn't even my gift!

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

I just bought my first issue of *Realms of Fantasy* today. It is absolutely amazing! I'm going to get a subscription as soon as I can. I've been searching for a magazine dedicated to fantasy only, but I haven't had much luck—until now. I love to read, write, draw, and do a million other things with fantasy. It has always bothered me that people think that sci-fi and fantasy are one in the same. I don't particularly mind sci-fi, but I don't particularly like it, either. It gets way too much attention, and pure fantasy fans like me often have to settle with intergalactic ships and photon torpedoes instead of talking dragons and enchanted swords. Almost everything—from movies to magazines—is dominated by sci-fi, its shadow looming over the fantasy genre. Thank you and everyone who created this magazine so that fans such as myself finally have a 'realm' to live in.

Alex Pecor

Alex, I'm glad you like the magazine, but there are a couple of things you should be aware of: First, there's a lot more to fantasy than talking dragons and enchanted swords, and if you keep reading these pages, you'll discover even more realms to be enchanted (or even disturbed) by. And while it may appear that "sci-fi" dominates the field, in truth it's the other way around. In bookstores (the only stores that count to someone like me), fantasy outsells SF by a margin of three to one.

Your letters and comments are welcome. Make sure you mark them as letters or they're likely to get mixed in with writer's guidelines requests. Send them to: Letters to the Editor, Realms of Fantasy, P.O. Box 527, Rumson, NJ 07760. Or better yet, e-mail: s.mccarthy@genie.geis.com.

REALMS OF FANTASY

VOLUME 2

NUMBER 1

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- Rules.



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A first birthday is a proud one that holds out promise for the future.

SO WHAT DID YOU THINK I'D WRITE ABOUT IN THE ONE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY EDITORIAL? Oh, sure, I could have come up with some other topic, one that didn't allow me to blow my own horn and lavishly praise all the sterling contributors and readers we've collected over the past twelve months, but really, why would I? So, before I get all philosophical on you, I'd like to thank everyone connected with this magazine, most notably the publishers, Carl Gnam and Mark Hintz, our long-suffering editorial coordinator Delinda Curtiss, my overworked assistant Becky McCabe, and our wonderful columnists Terri Windling, Gahan Wilson, and Mark Sumner. And there wouldn't be a magazine at all without all the incredibly patient and cooperative writers who send us such wonderful stories. As my birthday wish, I'll wish for the ability to shorten my response time to something slightly faster than the glaciers. Now it's time for the philosophical stuff.

If there ever was a time to celebrate a birth, it's now, on the first anniversary thereof. A first birthday is a sweet and proud one, one which still reflects the parent's anxiety and uncertainty, but which holds out promise for the future, of more and bigger birthdays to come. As the first birthday celebrant toddles toward maturity, cake is still allowed to be thrown, ice cream may be liberally applied to all flat surfaces, and presents may be tasted and discarded without hurt feelings to the givers. No one expects too much from a one year old—it's enough

that the baby is here, alive and well and tossing chocolate into the air. Behind the party smiles and the flashing cameras, though, the parents nervously eye their child. Is it big enough? Is it strong enough? Smart enough? Has it done well? They look at the mess in the living room and sigh. They know there are years worth of work still to come. And so, on a second birthday, more rules are applied. Parents have come to know what works and what doesn't when it comes to their child. No, cake may not leave the plate, and *don't* put that ice cream in your hair! As the child grows and matures, parents, friends and relatives expect more and more from it. Birthdays become events planned out like military maneuvers: so many friends at such and such a time, for so long and no longer. Parents begin to dread their approach and take to hiding in the next room until the party is over. Eventually, birthdays begin to pass with no notice whatever, except perhaps a furtive search for gray hairs.

So this one, our first, is a great one. We've survived our first crucial year: We're here, we're big enough, strong enough, smart enough. You weren't sure what to expect from us this first year, so nothing we did could really surprise you and make you think, "Well, that's not appropriate." By this time next year, you'll have had two years worth of *Rof*—enough to have some idea of what to expect in our pages, what we might do and what we might not. You'll begin to form opinions on what you find acceptable behavior and what you don't, and you'll surely let us know your views. (Don't forget, though, they're not called the "Terrible Twos" for nothing—maybe we'll listen and maybe we won't. Nyah, nyah.)

As the years pass, we'll grow into a form which none of us can predict today—ten years from now, we might look back at an issue from this first year and think, "Wow, I barely recognize that kid." On the other hand, maybe we'll smile and say, "Gosh, you haven't changed a bit." Whatever the future holds, I think it's important that this birthday, the most important, be celebrated the way nature intended. So in honor of *Realms of Fantasy's* first year, go to your kitchen, get a honkin' big scoop of ice cream, and rub it in your hair. Cake, anyone?

PS. When I notice how literally readers interpreted my "contest" editorial, I feel I must add that I don't really expect you to rub ice cream in your hair. OK? ♣

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DO YOU HAVE A HOPELESS CAUSE? SOME DOOMED BUT CONTINUING FIXATION which you persist in lugging after you through life? Which you find yourself spending hours of valuable work time on, over and over and over, even though you know the effort will once again be useless?

I do, and it is promoting the works of Clark Ashton Smith. I believe he is probably one of the greatest American authors of fantasy who ever lived and that his best is as good as any written in our mysterious land, but if you, dear reader, have only even previously *heard* of him, be proud and haughty, for you are in a very small, select group.

Smith was one of the three most influential crafters of fantasy whose work appeared upon the pulpy pages of the increasingly legendary *Weird Tales*. I have yet to encounter any reader, collector and or anthologist of the magazine's fiction who does not agree wholeheartedly with me on that point. Smith's posthumous fame, on the other hand, is positively minuscule compared to *Weird Tales'* other two giants—Howard P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard—and the earnings on his books published after his death so far only modestly exceed that of those printed during his poverty-stricken life.

Nevertheless, despite the persistent lack of success, brave souls do continue to put together and print his

work. Lin Carter assembled four collections for his series of "Adult Fantasy" books with Ballantine in the early '70s. Donald Sidney-Fryer—who has done such heroic work in the cause of Smith it has gone past counting—somehow persuaded *Timescape* to publish another three collections in the early '80s, and Arkham House continues sporadically to bring out a new discovery or anthology.

In recent years the torch has been taken up, and that right smartly and skillfully, by the Necronomicon Press of Rhode Island, which has been famed primarily for its continuing efforts at promoting Lovecraft.

Most of the Smith productions—including an excellent series of reprints of his short stories carefully restored to be more along the lines of what Clark Ashton had originally wanted published—have been overseen by Steve Behrends; and Behrends along with Will Murray, another Necronomicon stalwart, lovingly and skillfully have put together *Tales of Zothique* (by Clark Ashton Smith, Necronomicon Press, RI, 224 pp., paperback, \$11.95). It is one of the very best, possibly the best, anthologies of Smith's fiction assembled so far.

Though many of Smith's fantasies simply take place in some sector of that world which was contemporary with him, a good many of them occur in, and serve to expand and develop, a space-time milieu conceived and crafted by the author's extraordinary imagination.

The interplay between the stories and their fantastic environments is always highly effective. Those taking place in the long-gone, ancient era of Hyperborea, for example, tend to be barbaric and feisty, with lots of bracing cold and well-launched battle axes. Others occurring a little later on during the Dark Ages in Smith's mythical Averroigne drip with fearsome superstition and guilt and feature terrified monks cringing their way through the lush and sensual landscape of medieval tapestry.

Absolutely, and by all odds, the most sinister of Clark Ashton Smith's created worlds is Zothique. It exists during the final flickering of human life on—to segue into Smith's own words—"the last inhabited continent of Earth. The continents of our present cycle have sunken, perhaps several times. Some have remained submerged, others have risen, partially, and rearranged themselves...the science and machinery of our present civilization have long been forgotten, together with our present religions. But many gods are worshipped; and

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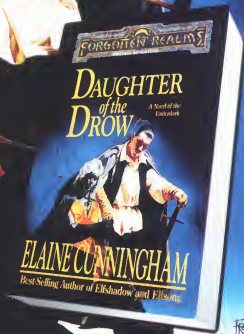
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socery and demonism prevail again as in ancient days."

Over this antique (with which, Smith wrote, Zothique rhymes very much on purpose) Earth, a reddened, dying sun rolls balefully and the stars gleam with a doom-promising brightness toward the end of the day. Barbarity has come again, but its re-arrival is only a decadent echo and completely lacks the verve of the original phenomenon, an exhausted rounding of the whole cycle of history.

Zothique's version of the bad old ways reek of age, the youthful enthusiasm of the Hyperborean is replaced with the cynicism of a species which has seen itself commit the same horrible blunders so many times and through so many eons that all hope of extrication from the cyclic repetition of pointless stupidities has long since fled and the most uplifting alternative to bleak despair left to the wise is to obtain as much hilarity as can be gained from contemplation of humanity's extended debacle.

Smith, in the manner of a Zothiquian sage, manages to get considerable pleasure from mulling on his dark world, and he passes it along very successfully to the reader. Part of the delicious irony of these stories is that—even though they primarily concern themselves with ghouls and zombies and other such necrophilous delights—they are not at all depressing since Clark Ashton Smith's

amusement at the appalling images his fertile mind has conjured up is highly contagious. Not for nothing did he come from Ambrose Bierce's corner of the world.

Also, Smith never falters in his poet's faith concerning the virtues of heroism or love. There are many stories of unstoppable bravery and profound devotion in Zothique, even if they occur in bizarrely incongruous settings. Necromancers violate glyph-laden catafalques in order to raise bony, nitre-soaked mummies from centuries-long entombments at their peril because, in spite of all his apparent cynicism, Smith believes that dignity can stir in the dustiest, most hollow breast and the scarest heart can be rewarmed by true contact with a kindred soul.

Also in these gorgeously ominous stories of idiot gods, of power misused by kings and necromancers and the causal cruelties of indifferent fate, there are occasional victories which the sinister background makes all the sweeter. It's much more of a thrill when you're not at all sure if the goal will be reached, or the evil thwarted, or the beloveds joined—as is most certainly the case in these tales—and he is! Something like real life.

So—again—I am fortunate enough to have a chance to promote the marvelous writings of Clark Ashton Smith.

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Books To Look For

Alvin Journeyman: The Tales of Alvin Maker IV, by Orson Scott Card (Tor, \$23.95 hardcover). Multiple-award winning writer Orson Scott Card returns to the series that the *Chicago Sun-Times* called "the most important work of American fantasy since Stephen Donaldson's original Thomas Covenant trilogy." The reviewers do not exaggerate: Card is one of our Most Important authors, and his Alvin series a modern American classic. If you haven't read the others, start now.

Borderland 4, edited by Thomas Monteleone (White Wolf Publishing, \$5.99, mass-market). This latest in the groundbreaking anthology series includes stories by Peter Straub, Dennis Etchison, William Browning Spencer, and more. The series hovers at the darker end of the fantasy spectrum, but for those of you who like a little something stronger in your diet, this could be your cup of tea.

Waylander, by David Gemmell (Del Rey, \$5.99, mass-market). This is the rousing final volume in the epic "Drenai" series by the internationally bestselling author of *Legend*. Critics have said that "there isn't a British writer in fantasy who can hold a candle to his ability to meld wizardry with high adventure." So if you like

wizardry and high adventure, go for it.

Kiss of the Vampire by Nancy Baker (Fawcett, \$5.99, mass-market). This is the mass-market edition of a hardcover which got very positive reviews from *USA Today* and *Publisher's Weekly* last year. If you like your vampires sexy and sensual, you should give this a try.

The Death of Chaos, by L.E. Modesitt Jr. (Tor, \$24.95, hardcover). This is the fifth in the bestselling "Recluce" series, and each seems to be outselling those before it. This military fantasy saga is gaining fans with each book, so if you think it sounds like an interesting twist on the genre, you certainly have a nice long series read ahead of you.

The Eternal Champion, Volume 1, by Michael Moorcock (White Wolf, \$19.95, hardcover, omnibus edition). Surely you know all about Elric of Melniboné, the Eternal Champion, don't you? You don't? Well, put down this magazine, dash out and pick up this first of White Wolf's glorious reissues of these eternal classics, come back, put down the books, pick up the magazine again, finish the magazine (it's much shorter than the books), then sit down for one heck of a magical ride. This is the Real Thing, folks.

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and best artists ever to spin dreams. There has never been a better introduction to his superbly playful imagination than this collection, which—for the very first time ever—assembles all the known works written by him concerning dark and fabulous Zothique. A dealer specializing in fantasy may carry this or be kind enough to order it for you, but the Necronomicon Press is not a large and wealthy publisher, and their works are not so easily located, so you may have to write and order it from them at P.O. Box 1304, West Warwick, RI 02893.

I would recommend him in the same breath with Tolkien or Dunsany or MacDonald. And who knows? Your reading of him might be what finally starts the landslide which gives this shamefully ignored magician the recognition he's deserved these many long years of general neglect.

I certainly hope so.

The Ghosts of Sleath, by James Herbert, HarperPrism, NY, 336 pp., hardcover, \$20.00.

Here's a clump of three books which are interesting illustrations of what seems to be happening to novels of supernatural menace these days. The first one, *The Ghosts of Sleath*, by James Herbert, is a fine, rip-roaring example of what was once a radical departure in format, but which now has become the comfortable, old-timey approach to the challenge.

Herbert has been turning out grim thrillers

for quite a stretch now, starting with pleasantly over-the-top, wild and woolly stuff like *The Rats* and *The Fog*, and then moving by gradual degrees into a more elegant and stately style; but one which has never wandered from what I think of as—and not disparagingly, mind—the bare and bloody-boned Spook House approach.

The Spook House novel is a good deal of fun when presented by a competent master of the form. The game is essentially to grab the reader firmly by the brain stem with both pale, bony hands at the very first line of the very first page, and then mercilessly haul the poor creature from one horrifying shock to another with as few noticeable pauses as possible until he or she finds him or herself blinking in an otherwise slumbering house somewhere in the wee dark hours of the morning—dinner untouched, TV set never even near to being turned on—blinking in stunned astonishment at the final and most ghastly revelation on the final page of the now completely finished volume which is clutched tremblingly in his or her chilled fingers.

Sleath moves without any ado whatsoever into a no-nonsense start by introducing a psychic investigator from the "Institute" on the job in the middle of the night, crouched in a concealed hiding place with his hi-tech ghost gear at the ready, waiting for a phantom who glows green in the dark and has been successfully persuading far too many residents of an old folk's home to voluntar-

ily plunge themselves into the afterlife.

The investigator resolves this bit of business briskly—and if you think I'm going to rat and tell you what the Sleep Angel turns out to be, you've got another think coming!—just long enough to skillfully and subliminally inject bits and pieces of the investigator's troubled background into the reader's mind (it turns out he's got a serious psychological problem with specters, but I'm not going to spill the beans on the whys and wherefores of that one, either!), and then, with no pause whatsoever, Herbert has the "Institute" fling his investigator into the grim little streets of tiny, surly, secret-laden Sleath and a job which may be the Big Enchilada of his entire career: the tidying up of a whole haunted town!

There's no person nor place in all of sinister Sleath, it seems, who is not one way or another plagued by highly disturbing visitations from the spirit world. The spooks come in all shapes and sizes—of course it goes without saying in this sort of book that many of them are very naughty sexually—and our investigator soon realizes he is not dealing merely with contemporary haunts, but also ghoulish entities which have been in business since olden days of yore and who had and continue to have associations with highly celebrated occult villains of the past, including no less than Sir Francis Dashwood, political biggie of the 1700s, intimate of such lastingly renowned types as Benjamin



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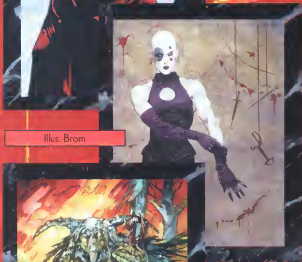
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Franklin and William Hogarth, and the founder and head blasphemer of the legendary Hell-Fire Club with its nun-filled orgies, although, just to hint (for once) at what our investigator uncovers, it turns out that Sir Frank is small potatoes next to the evil rascals who instigated the psychic infections plaguing poor old Sleath.

Naturally things get worse and worse and eventually rise to a violently gory climax, which (here I give away nothing important as it is vital in a Spook House book that we have a cathartic resolution) results in the evil being expunged. It's true this is achieved at great cost and some considerable loss of life to various characters in the story, but since it is obvious that nobody in a classical Spook House such as this book ever really exists—we may be fed much interesting gossip about the various characters, but they never really come to life—we don't have any great qualms about the slaughter even if its hideous details such as, say, the ripping off of facial flesh in bloody strips, may give us empathetic twinges, especially if they are described in shocking detail, which, of course, they are.

The X-Files: Whirlwind, by Charles Grant, HarperPrism, 254 pp., paperback, \$4.99.

This book by Charles Grant is an expert demonstration of what can be done with the Spook House format when the author introduces believable characters and resonating

social situations into the story, thereby producing what might be described as an *Inhabited Spook House*. And he manages to do it with the added handicap of managing the subtle hobblings produced by writing a show biz adaptation.

Fortunately for Grant, the show biz item he's working with is one of the most literary ones to come down the pike in recent years: the *X-Files* television series, which—and I'm fully aware of the pathos of this statement—has produced by far the best horror movies filmed in recent years. Being a weekly full-hour show, the quality of their dramas has been, of course, uneven, but that's because they're only human. The quality of their efforts would certainly be enough to positively humiliate the people who have been grinding out the tacky, depressingly safe and dismally unfrightening movies which have been released in the theaters of late (or relegated to TV showings at the ungodly hours they so richly deserve) if the people responsible for that junk had the sensibility to realize what fools it makes of them, which, of course, they don't.

With another author, *The X-Files: Whirlwind* could certainly have ended up a very bad Spook House book, but since the people at HarperPrism had the good sense to hire Grant—who is one of the best contemporary American writers of inhabited Spooky books around (not to mention being one of the best anthologists and publishers of same)—he

has written them, and us, a dandy little thriller which does much more than meet all the challenges of presenting a running television series in book form, it presents a solid cast of characters with convincing and expanding interactions, and provides us with a menace which not only satisfies the *X-Files* assignment very satisfactorily, but also works extremely well in its literary format.

The action takes place in New Mexico and makes all sorts of clever use of the multitudes of amazingly complicated societal arrangements Native Americans and Anglos have extemporized through many difficult years in order to get along tolerably with one another. Many of the characters border on the edge of Cliche Canyon (I'm sure you've heard pilots point it out to the passengers over the intercom just about a half hour before jetting into LAX) and with a lesser author they could easily have tumbled in, but Grant's hand is steady, his insight and technique does not falter, and they all live and breathe, Mulder and Scully included. Grant makes you care about them. Even the walk-ons.

California Gothic, by Dennis Etchison, Abyss, NY, 324 pp., paperback, \$4.99.

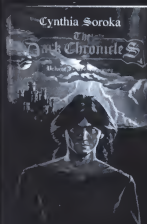
Dennis Etchison, unburdened in *California Gothic* by the restrictions accompanying a TV adaptation assignment, is free to wander any way which strikes him as interesting in this

Continued on page 36

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ANGELS SEEM TO BE A HOT TOPIC RIGHT NOW. ANGEL PINS, EARRINGS, AND A HEAVENLY host of paraphernalia are being sold in stores and hawked on television commercials. There have been many high-rated television documentaries, and even a couple of series. *Highway to Heaven* enjoyed some popularity a few years ago and, more recently, *Touched by an Angel* has been a cult, if not a ratings, hit.

The big screen also has reflected an interest in angels during the last few years, though audience reaction—not to mention box office receipts—have been mixed. Angel fantasies have always been a Hollywood staple, but one recent entry was *Date With an Angel* (1987). It featured outstanding wing FX by Richard Edlund, but the movie bombed at the box office. A more recent attempt was the Danny Glover vehicle *Angels in the Outfield*, itself a remake of a 1950s film.

In general, these movies have been as lightweight as the heavenly beings that inhabit them. Angels are usually shown as benign, helpful spirits, paragons of piety and virtue. In keeping with this theme, most angel movies are comedies or have comedic elements.

Miramax's new film *The Prophecy* bucks the recent comedy trend, instead presenting, at times, a harder edged horrific view of angels and the universe they inhabit. The film toplines Christopher Walken, Eric Stoltz, Virginia Madsen, Elias Koteas, and Amanda Plummer. Gregory Widen, best known as the screenwriter of *Backdraft* and the original *Highlander*, helmed the project, as well as writing the screenplay.

The screen scribe begins by explaining that *The Prophecy* is the story "of a group of very dangerous, very homicidal angels who are trying to hunt down the soul of a human general who recently died. The soul has been hidden in the body of a little girl—and to get the soul,

they have to kill her."

The angels need a colonel because "humans know more about war than angels, and that's kind of ironic. It's the story of renegade angels who, jealous of man's position, start a rebellion in heaven that spills down to Earth."

Widen concedes the movie's vision is a stark, even grim one, but maintains it's an alternative universe that's firmly based on fact. Elaborates Widen, "Part of the concept of the movie is that angels are God's hit men. We have this fluffy idea of them lately. But if you read the Bible, they spend a good deal of their time burning, killing, and turning people to salt! So the idea is even the 'good' angels are a little scary!"

There are no moral absolutes in *The Prophecy*; instead of black and white, there are only shades of gray. Eric Stoltz plays Simon, a "good" angel to Christopher Walken's "bad" angel; but in this movie, everything is relative. In fact, Stoltz is in one faction of the seraphim that are fighting each other, but he's far from being the lead singer in the heavenly choir.

"Eric Stoltz is a good angel," describes Widen, "but it's how you define good! He has a great angelic face, yet at the same time it was a different kind of role for him. He had to be seductive, and also dangerous."

In fact, Stoltz's character helps to propel the plot forward. "Since one angel faction needs a colonel," the director explains, "Stoltz takes that soul, though it's the soul of someone who was about the worst man who ever lived. But Stoltz is mortally wounded—angels aren't immortal on Earth—so he knows he can't get back with the soul."

"He had to hide the soul somewhere, and since he knows he won't be able to get out with it, he lures a little eight-year-old Navaho girl to him and sticks it in her body. Angels die on Earth, by the way, by having their hearts torn out."

Once the soul is hidden in the little Navajo Indian girl, humans enter the story line in a major way. Virginia Madsen plays the little girl's schoolteacher, who ends up getting involved in saving the child's life. The hero of the film—if there is a hero—is played by Elias (Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles) Koteas. He's a homicide detective named Tom Dagget who's investigating a murder. The murder is unusual, and a chain of events leads him to Arizona and some celestial intrigue.

The Prophecy marks Widen's big-screen debut as a direc-

Christopher Walken as the evil angel Gabriel watches as his mortal slave digs up Colonel Hawthorne's grave in order to retrieve the colonel's soul, in *The Prophecy*.



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C.J. & Extra Innings	Clarkstown	NJ	Coastal Collectables	NV	Albany	OK	T.P. Sports Cards	Richmond	VA
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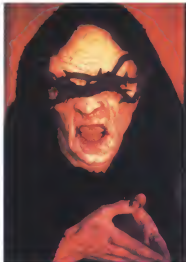
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Randy Jones plays the devil Lucifer's grotesque sycophant sidekick.

tor. While he may be a fledgling on the big screen, he previously directed an episode of HBO's acclaimed Gothic series *Tales from the Crypt*. One might think that "wearing two hats" as both screenwriter and director would simplify matters. Certainly, there's no conflict in terms of an artist's overall vision.

But Widen maintains some difficulties do lurk under the surface. Comments the director, "The main problem is that you don't have that extra person looking over your shoulder. If you're a writer and hopefully get along with your director, then that director is looking over your shoulder. Here, it's much more insular. As a writer/director, there's always a chance you're making a movie only you understand! There aren't the checks and balances of another person."

For all its grim reality, it was this alternative view of angels—angels as almost gangsterlike, morally ambivalent beings—that got Widen's creative juices flowing. In fact, the helmsman credits John Milton's seventeenth century epic poem *Paradise Lost* as providing the initial inspiration.

Though few people, save some agonized English lit students, read Milton today, Widen says he "liked the concept of dealing with why an angel goes bad. Here are God's assistants, and yet they have free will to start a war. I mean, what would it be like to be a creature who praises God all day—yet you also do God's dirty work."

Widen is understandably cryptic on the subject of special FX, because he doesn't want to spoil some surprises. He does admit that audiences will be treated to a vision of heaven that's more like hell. "It's a heaven," he intones, "where there are thousands of slaughtered angels, all on an arid plain." Sounds like a vision that the Reverend Billy Graham isn't going to endorse anytime soon.

Angels are usually depicted as Renaissance paintings that have come to life, images

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worthy of Botticelli. There's a solid tradition of western art that has angels in white gowns, sprouting eagle-like wings. In *The Prophecy*, the angels wear odd collections of clothes that they have picked up over the centuries. Reveals Widen, they favor "long coats and out-of-date boots."

Widen himself is something of an improbable success story. It's not that he didn't have talent, but he got some lucky breaks in a business that's notoriously hard to break into.

"I was a UCLA film student," remembers Widen, "but I had no friends or family in the business. I had no experience; I just started sending out my script to agents, saying in effect, 'Hi—I'm Greg—represent me!' You're always told that kind of approach never works, but somebody read it, liked it, and it got made."

"It" was the script for *Highlander* (1986), the Sean Connery-Christopher Lambert film that has since spawned three feature films to date and a television series. It's the story of a group of immortal swordsmen, some good and some evil, and their duels across the centuries. Connery played "Ramirez," a 2,000-year-old immortal who grooms Lambert to join the exclusive fraternity.

The director acknowledges how lucky he was to have his first script made into a feature film. *Highlander* failed at the U.S. box office, largely due to a poor publicity campaign, but it was an enormous hit in Europe. It gained enough of a following, even in the



Lucifer (Viggo Mortensen), handsome in the flesh, overlooks the trivial lives of mortals from a rocky perch.

United States, to spawn the various sequels.

It was a trip to England that provided the original inspiration for *Highlander*. "I was twenty years old," Widen recalls, "and visiting the Tower of London. The Tower of London has the largest collection of armor in the world. I thought to myself, 'Suppose you owned all this? Suppose you wore all this? And what if you never died, and you wore all this through the ages?'"

Returning to *The Prophecy*, Gregory Widen concludes by saying he wants to offer fantasy fans something different from the usual run of genre films. "The whole movie is different in the sense you're trying to tell a story that's important on an emotional level, not just a straightforward film. I'm trying to convey the idea of a whole different universe, a universe with some familiar elements, but different from what you expect." ■

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The magical lore of Italy is white as ricotta and red as blood.

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I've come to spend a month in a Tuscan hill town close to the city of Florence, lured to this country by the art, the food, and these words from the introduction to Calvino's book: "It is generally accepted that Italian tales from the oral tradition were recorded in literary works long before those of any other country." Likewise, from Marina Warner's recent work on the history of fairy tales (*From the Beast to the Blonde*): "Il Pentamerone (by Italian writer Giambattista Basile)... can lay claim to being the foundation stone of the modern literary fairy tale; published in 1634-36, it contains some of the earliest written versions of the most familiar stories." And so I've come here to explore the rich folklore tradition of Italy, following in the footsteps of Calvino, Warner, the Pre-Raphaelite painters, and countless other writers and artists who all succumbed to a passion for the stories of Italia [sic]—and the beautiful land from which they spring.

Calvino began his task of collection with a dry, detached interest in the subject; but "I was gradually possessed by a kind of mania," he writes, "an insatiable hunger for more and more versions and variants... as a

result of which I would have given all of Proust in exchange for a new variant of the 'gold-dung donkey.'" He gradually became convinced that the "grace, wit, and unity of design" to be found in the fairy tales of Italy is unsurpassed in the western world. Yet, when we think of European fairy tales, we generally think of the French tales of Charles Perrault, the German tales of the Brothers Grimm, or the Danish tales of H. C. Andersen. We rarely think of Italy as being central to the European fairy tale tradition—and indeed, it was not until the 1950s that Calvino's book (translated into English by George Martin) finally presented a comprehensive Italian collection to compare with the work of the Brothers Grimm. Yet centuries ago, these stories would have been known and circulated throughout Europe—both through the oral tradition and through the publications of early Italian authors like Boccaccio, Straparola, and Basile. In Italy we find some of the earliest published versions of very familiar fairy tales indeed: *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, *Puss in Boots*, *Red Riding Hood*, *Donkeyskin*, *The Handless Maiden*, and many, many others—told in an earthy, unflinching manner common to the oldest of fairy stories.

In the folklore of Italy (that is, of the disparate regions that make up the modern country of Italy) we see the influence of three storytelling traditions: classical, Christian, and medieval. In classical Italic mythology, the pantheon of ancient Rome (Jupiter, Juno, Apollo, Venus, and a vast family of other gods) borrowed heavily from Hellenic myth—so much so that standard reference texts often list the two together under the label "Greco-Roman." The New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology states that "the term Roman Mythology requires some explanation, even justification. The religious system whose center is placed for convenience in Rome was not in fact purely Roman...

Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli captured the tradition of his native folklore in the famous painting, *The Birth of Venus*. Besides Venus, other Greek mythological characters depicted include Zephyr and Chloris to the left, and one of the goddesses of the seasons on the right.



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but a mosaic in which can be recognized contributions that were Etruscan, Alban, Sabine, Greek, Syrian, Persian, Egyptian." Virgil wrote his sad and glorious *Aeneid* as a deliberate evocation of the earlier Greek epics of Homer, taking as his protagonist a minor character from Homer's fall of Troy. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is likewise steeped in a mixture of ancient Greek and Roman stories. With the introduction of Christianity, many of these old stories transformed and became attached to Catholic saints and martyrs; or to Mary, whose worship as the Queen of Heaven was once widespread throughout Italy. Pagan holy sites and shrines were rededicated to Christian figures, yet they retained their mystical quality, enshrouded by legendary tales of visitations and miracles.

"I remain impressed by how the subsequent traditions of Italy flowed together," comments Midori Snyder, a fantasy writer who has spent the last year living in Milan; "...not so much a crisis as in Celtic countries, where Druids slammed against the oncoming church, but where all these strands of faith and storytelling merged, sometimes quite playfully. Italy is a country where satyrs and saints sat down together to dine."

In medieval Italy, around the thirteenth century, poets began to write in the Italian language rather than composing exclusively in Latin. The first great epic poet of the era was Dante, a political exile from Florence whose stunning *Divine Comedy* depicts the author's journey through the circles of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. Dante is guided through these horrors and wonders by the spirits of the poet Virgil, and of Beatrice, whom Dante had loved (chastely, devoutly, ceaselessly) since glimpsing her as a child. Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* is the Italian equivalent of *The Canterbury Tales*, an entertaining and rather bawdy collection of "an [sic] Hundred Stories in Ten Days Told by Seven Ladies and Three Young Men" in escape from Florence during an outbreak of the Plague. The stories of the *Charlemagne Cycle*, and the love adventures of Charlemagne's nephew, Roland, were brought from France into medieval Italy by several poets. The most accomplished of these poets was Ariosto, who took over ten years to compose *Orlando Furioso* (Roland Insane), a rather rambling but hilarious narrative in which our hero is driven completely mad by his passion for an Oriental princess. All of these stories were popular throughout the regions of Italy, for they were available even to illiterate audiences in oral form. As a result, traces of Boccaccio or Ariosto can be found in the fairy tales collected from remote rural areas, and many folktales still have a strong medieval flavor in their language and imagery.

Jack Dann is an accomplished contemporary writer who conjures the Italy of centuries past in his adult fairy tale "The Glass Casket" (published in the anthology *Snow White, Blood Red*). The story is set, Dann

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explains, "In the time of Leonardo da Vinci, Machiavelli, and the poet, philosopher and magus, Pico della Mirandola. An aura of magic and mysticism surrounded Pico della Mirandola, who spent his short but brilliant life searching the caballah and other occult sciences for the meaning of truth and love and beauty. I have questioned what he would do if he found the object of his desire. Indeed, what would any of us do?" Dann has also set his novel *The Path of Remembrance* in the time of the Italian Renaissance, "when magic was as legitimate a pursuit as philosophy, theology, science, or art. A time of great brutality and sensitivity, eroticism and religion, and brilliant painting and poetry."

The art of Renaissance Italy is indeed brilliant and extraordinary, mixing imagery from classical myth, pagan folklore, and medieval Christian symbology. The Sibyls—prophetic pagan sorceresses with the tails of snakes hidden under their skirts—were said to have foretold the coming of Christ and thus were incorporated into Christian legendry, taking their place on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel painted by Michaelangelo. Botticelli painted centaurs and goddesses to hang beside his luminous Madonnas; Fra Angelico graphically depicted the slaving demon servants of Lucifer; Piero di Cosimo painted fantastical beasts roiling in the oceans of classical myths; Piero della Francesca portrayed the enchanted legend of the Queen of Sheba in gorgeous frescoes still to be seen gracing the walls of an ancient Tuscan church.

The art of the Renaissance has turned Rome, Venice, and particularly Florence into cities where stories surround us everywhere we look, shimmering on the peeling plaster walls, gleaming down from mosaic ceilings, holding up the rooftops in figures carved in white marble and stone. Venice, a city floating on water, is in itself a work of fantasy. With its masks and mists, its crumbling palaces, its winged lions and Byzantium domes, to walk its streets is like walking through a dream or the pages of a fantasy novel.

It was in Venice in 1550 that Giovan Francesco Straparola (the "Babbler") published his *Piacevoli Notti* (The Pleasant Nights), setting into print the magical tales told by a circle of women storytellers—or so he attributed its authorship when brought up before the Venetian Inquisition on a charge of indecency. In the following century, Neapolitan author and historian Giambattista Basile published *Il Pentamerone*, or *Lo cunto di li cunti* (The Tale of Tales)—the splendid cycle of fifty stories which Marina Warner credits as the foundation for the modern literary fairy tale, predating the tales that came out of French literary salons later that same century. (The French court writers were almost certainly familiar with Basile's work.) This is a bawdy, comical, violent, romantic, and thoroughly magical work, with a frame story about a princess who is unable to laugh. When a series of escapades

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causes an old woman to fall comically and expose herself, the princess finally laughs—and is promptly cursed by the old woman, setting off the whole adventure. It can be difficult to find Sir Richard Burton's 1893 English translation of this Italian fantasy masterpiece—but it is worth the effort, for it contains riveting early versions of some of our most familiar fairy tales: *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, and a host of others.

In the eighteenth century, Venetian Carlo Gozzi created a fad for fairy stories on the stages of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, mixing wizards and witches with masked Harlequins and Pantaloon and other stock *Commedia* figures. All of Venice was a fairy tale then, for this was the time when the city was famed for its wealth and its lavish decadence—a time when Carnival (a festival known for fantastical costumes and wild extravagance) lasted most of the year and not just the weeks leading up to the austerity of Lent. With a costume, or even just a mask, social and class barriers dissolved; all manner of outrageous behavior was permissible. Some Venetian men and women never left the house without their mask in place.

In the nineteenth century there was another revival of interest in Italian fairy stories, this time not so much by writers and artists but by scholars and collectors (an interest provoked by the avid work of folklorists in Germany, Finland, and elsewhere).

In Sicily, around 1875, a medical doctor



This detail from Botticelli's *Primavera* shows the Three Graces, handmaidens to Venus.

named Giuseppe Pitre developed a passion for folktales and soon had a large team of collectors working to record the stories of the local people—particularly those of Messina, a quiltmaker in Borgo. The result of Pitre's obsession is the twenty-five volume *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane*. His collection of Italian folk art and craftsmanship can still be seen at the Pitre Museum in Palermo. In Tuscany, Gherardo Nerucci, a lawyer, published *Sixty Popular Tales From Montale* in 1880. His primary source was also a woman, a widow named Luisa Ginanni. Giuseppe

Bernoni published booklets of Venetian tales during this same period; other collectors recorded works from Rome, Bologna, Calabria, and many other cities and regions.

Italo Calvino has drawn from all these sources in his *Italian Folktales*, seeking to represent the different regions of the country, each with its own particular flavor. What characteristics do these tales have in common? Calvino points to a love of metamorphosis: the fruit that becomes a girl, the swine that becomes a prince, the lover who is conjured from a basin of milk. He notes how "the natural cruelties of the folktale give way to the rules of harmony. The continuous flow of blood that characterizes the Grimms' brutal [German] tales is absent. The Italian folktale seldom displays unbearable ferocity. Although the notion of cruelty persists along with an injustice bordering on inhumanity as part of the constant stuff of stories, although the woods forever echo with the weeping of maidens or of forsaken brides with severed hands, gory ferocity is never gratuitous; the narrative does not dwell on the torment of the victim...but moves swiftly to a healing solution, a part of which is the quick and pitiless punishment of the malefactor."

What Calvino, an Italian, does not seem to notice is the common ingredient most apparent to the American reader: the delicious abundance of food imagery—the young heroes setting off with cheese and sausage in

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The Coming of Dawn is one of The National Library of Poetry's recent hardbound anthologies.

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their pockets, the maidens with skin as white as ricotta, the children born from the core of fruit, the bridegrooms made of flour and salt. Elizabeth A. Lynn noted this tendency in her hilarious Italian version of Rapunzel ("The Princess in the Tower," published in *Snow White, Blood Red*). Mickey Roessner Herman and Midori Snyder are both fantasy writers at work on Italianate novels rich in both calories and magic. Italian fairy tales touch on all of the senses; they are far more sensual, even outright ribald, than their German, French and English kin. An Italian version of *Sleeping Beauty* is a good example of this—a variant older than the French and German versions we're familiar with today.

A childless queen at last gives birth to a beautiful baby daughter. On the princess' fifteenth birthday, she pricks her finger on a spindle and falls down, dead. Yet the girl is as beautiful as ever; her flesh does not grow stiff and cold even though she is no longer breathing and her heart no longer beats. Her parents cannot bring themselves to bury her, and so they wall her up instead in a tower on a tall hillside, with no doors and only one window. There she lays on a sumptuous bed, wearing a bridal dress with seven skirts sewn with silver bells. One day a long time afterward, a young king comes upon the tower. His curiosity is piqued and he climbs through the thorn-covered window. He swoons when he finds the beautiful maiden, and so obsessed does he become with her that he returns every day thereafter, embracing her over and over again. Eventually, so intense is his love that it results in her pregnancy; the princess gives birth to twins, although she continues to lie as still as death. As the hungry babies try to suckle, the boy-child sucks the splinter from her finger—and the princess wakes, astonished, as indeed one would expect. The young king promises to marry her, and then he goes back to his own castle to make arrangements for the wedding. But the moment he reaches his castle he falls sick and must be put to bed. As he raves in his delirium, his jealous mother discovers all and sends soldiers to the tower. The soldiers fetch the babies, and the king's mother gives them to the cook, ordering him to dress and roast and serve them to the king. But the cook substitutes lambs instead, and bravely hides each child away. Then the mother has the soldiers fetch the lovely tower princess herself, and orders the cook to boil her into a stew for the king's dinner. As the princess walks to the boiling pot, all the silver bells ring on her skirt, piercing through the castle and the fever-dreams of the king. He wakes, discovers his mother's plot—and discovers how the cook has foiled it. And then it is the mother who is thrown in the pot, and the king gets on with his wedding....

This uncensored version of *Sleeping Beauty* is a long way from the animated Disney tale that most of us know today. It was not a story meant for children's ears, like so many of the old fairy stories. Yet, Italy also has a long tra-



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dition of fantasy tales that were penned for children—the best known, of course, being Carlos Collodi's *Pinocchio*. Collodi's dark story of a wooden puppet who longs to be a boy of flesh and blood is deservedly a world-wide classic of children's literature. Like J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, the original story is well worth reading, for it has been tamed and watered down by too many simplistic modern renditions. "I think modern audiences are made uncomfortable by the strong moral of the tale," says William Todd-Jones, an English puppeteer working on a new *Pinocchio* film, directed by Steve Barron. (It is Todd-Jones' job to manipulate Pinocchio's dancing, running feet). "In the Collodi version, things happen to Pinocchio directly because of his own actions. In many modern versions this is played down, and the consequences made less frightening. But Collodi's story reminds us that we all have the potential to be truly wicked—that goodness is not inherent; it is a choice we must consciously make. Pinocchio repeatedly fails to make that choice. And then terrible things happen to him...."

We'll look at the *Pinocchio* story a little more closely in a future Folkroots column; we'll go to Prague, where the new movie is being filmed, to examine how one takes a classic fantasy tale, with its roots in the folk tradition, and adapt it to Hollywood screen. (That journey is two issues away; next issue, we'll look at the Celtic legends of Wales, a misty land with stories quite different from those of sun-baked Italy.)

As my own journey through the magical forests and fields of Italy comes to a close, I find myself thinking of Calvino's eloquent words as he finished his folktale book. "Will it be possible to come down to earth again? For two years I have lived in woodlands and enchanted castles...and during these two years the world about me gradually took on the attributes of fairyland; where everything that happened was a spell or a metamorphosis; where individuals were carried away by predestined loves, or were bewitched; where sudden disappearances, and monstrous transformations occurred; where right had to be discerned from wrong; where paths bristling with obstacles led to a happiness held captive by dragons. I had the impression that the lost rules which govern the world of folklore were tumbling out of the magic box I had opened. Now that the book is finished, I know that this was not a hallucination, a sort of professional malady, but the confirmation of something I had already suspected—folktales are real."

Like Italy itself, Italian folktales cast a spell, work a strong magic. It is a spell of metamorphosis, of dove maidens and swine princes. It colors this corner of the world with enchantment: a magic you can feel, and smell, and taste. Every bird is a maiden under a spell, every cabbage hides a hole that leads to fairyland. The goats pass by the farmhouse door, and each one is a king's son in disguise. ☼

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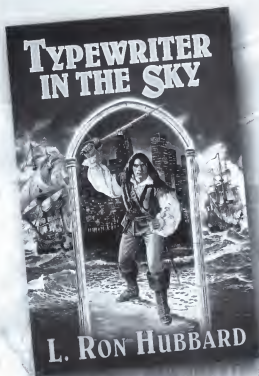
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BOOKS

Continued from page 18

really brilliant examination of our increasingly macabre society. He does cover a most amazing amount of the California he knows so well, but he never ever wanders. The book does not lure its readers into an aimless ramble, it conscripts them into a merciless forced march into his beloved state's, and our nation's, ever growing darkness.

Etchison, being one of our very best authors of regional fantasy we are fortunate enough to have working, skillfully and with seeming ease pilots the Spook House format through the inhabited stage (the convincing reality of his characters, especially the awed bafflement of his heroes at encountering his villains, and the chilling effectiveness of those villains, always lurks with you long after you've laid his books aside) and moves it along into its next evolution by making it part of a horrendously believable fictional landscape which stretches behind and before the reader until it reaches out from the book and blends insidiously and inseparably into ordinary, day-to-day life.

This unnerving ambiguity is a hallmark of the best Spook House work afoot these days. With an almost innocent gesture, the authors of books exploring these regions unveil to the reader the lack of demarcation between their fiction and the outside reality. All is seen, completely without conflict, two ways at once: as a nightmare fantasy and as a devastatingly straight look at the stark, all-too-true truths about our lives and times. In Buddhist fashion, and with the weird gentleness of a Roshi, they demonstrate how these two supposedly opposing orientations actually serve to strengthen and clarify one another.

Etchison uses a wide variety of extremely clever means to move from one to the other of these two points of view until they're thoroughly blended. Perhaps the most amazing technique employed in this book is to drift in and out of the script of the sort of dreadful horror movie we see so much of these days—the kind I was carping about when reviewing Grant's *X-Files*—the kind wherein far too many ludicrous special effects weigh down a fluff, preadolescent script and which, if it makes enough money, their remarkably uncreative producers routinely recycle into endless sequels with Roman numerals tacked onto the behinds of their titles.

A large amount of confusion between this silly movie and the events in the "real" world of the novel are compounded when the hero's son gets involved in a fantasy of "producing" an amateur sequel (we can see the golden, glowing "It" gleam in his mind's eye!) of the professional film with one of his pals and finds his childish, gross-out fantasies becoming intermingled (both in his imagination and in the images the lens of the camera brings him through its

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viewer) with actual monstrosities which are hopelessly beyond his grasp.

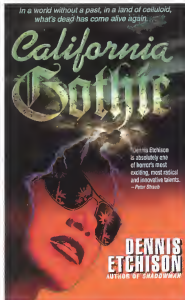
I've no idea what will happen next with this genre, but *California Gothic* indicates things look pretty promising!

Gahan Wilson

Storm Rising: Book Two of the Mage Storms, by Mercedes Lackey, *Daw Books*, NY, 416 pp., hardcover, \$21.95.

The danger with the second book of a trilogy is that it will feel unresolved and unsatisfying. It often lacks the excitement of the first book, in which the characters, the danger, and the conflict are all being revealed. And it lacks the big satisfaction of the third book, in which everything is concluded. Enough conflict must remain at the end of the second book to keep the third installment exciting. Many trilogies suffer from this weakness. Mercedes Lackey, however, has no trouble escaping this trap in *Storm Rising*.

The mage storms are a series of storms of unknown origin sweeping the land, disrupting magic, creating horrible monsters, and bringing on a terrible winter. The plot is made up of two story lines that intersect about three-quarters of the way through the book. One is the story of Imperial Grand Duke Tremane and his troops, who have been cut off from the rest of their army and abandoned in enemy territory. Before winter comes on, Tremane must secure the loyalty of the local townspeople, gather enough food



and supplies for his men, and build a wall to protect from the horrors created by the storms. His struggle is involving and compelling and is described with the powerful details only an author who has studied history could supply.

The second story line takes place in the land of Valdemar and involves many char-

acters, but the most striking is Karal, a former secretary to the ambassador of Karse suddenly promoted to ambassador when his superior is killed. Valdemar is temporarily protected from the mage storms by a magical "breakwater" constructed in the first book, but new protection must be devised quickly. Karal's struggle to make a difference in his new position and to earn the respect of his much older colleagues is one that most of us can relate to. Many of the other members of the grand council on which he sits would rather attack the vulnerable Tremane than worry about the future collapse of the breakwater. He must fight stupidity, prejudice, and shortsightedness that are all too realistic. Characters like Karal and Tremane are the heart of Lackey's books, and with their flaws, weaknesses, and struggles they are people we can relate to and care about.

When these two story lines at last unite, the resulting climax leaves us simultaneously satisfied—and longing for more. Not an easy feat. While the world Lackey has created with this trilogy and the fifteen (!) other novels in the epic *Heralds of Valdemar* series is not the most unique fantasy universe you will ever encounter, it is one of the richest, most fully realized ones. It is a world every lover of fantasy should visit. Once you jump into this world, you'll find yourself immediately involved, surrounded by new friends, and glad you made the trip.

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TULLI, PRINCE OF THE MONGOLS

BY WILLIAM F. WU

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A LIGHT WIND BLEW FROM the west through the summer night, sending a swirl of yellowish dust along the straight, wide streets of Dadu. At the window of a small house, a pair of closed wooden shutters rattled in their frame. Inside, by the flame of burning oil in a brass lamp, Wu Tianfeng rose from his desk where his rice paper, brushes, and ink stick lay and untied the cord that held the shutters together.

"Young master, is that wise?" In the open doorway behind him, Widow Li

spoke meekly, holding a wooden tray with a porcelain teapot and a cup, as the lamplight played across her. A woman without family, she worked as Tianfeng's servant and lived in the small house.

"I HEARD THE TALE THEY TELL IN THE streets." Tianfeng opened the shutters. "I shall be up late tonight. If the demon wants to visit with someone, he is welcome here."

Widow Li's eyes widened. Small and bone-thin, she moved to his desk as the breeze fluttered her plain blue gown against her. She poured tea for him, and the flame threw her large, misshapen shadow against the far wall. "Please do not make jokes, young master. I bought plums from the fruit-seller who was found dead only a block from here three days ago."

"I fear no demon, Widow Li. If he comes, he shall find me first. Lock the door to your room and sleep in peace."

Chastised, she bowed. Then she reached for a teacup left on his desk earlier in the evening. Her shadow leaned with her.

"Leave it," Tianfeng said lightly. "Perhaps the demon will have tea."

Widow Li frowned at his attempt at humor. "I have heard in the market that the demon's victims rise from their graves as demons themselves, young master."

"Good night," he said pointedly, turning back to his desk.

Widow Li bowed once more and closed the door after her.

Tianfeng sat at his desk. Ignoring the freshly poured teacup, he filled the cup he had used earlier. Holding it in both hands, he raised it to smell the aroma. Perhaps this teapot held the last tea he would ever drink.

He understood her puzzlement. He had not told her how hopeless his life had become. A man without reason to live felt no fear of demons.

Tianfeng sipped his tea and gazed out the window. The moon, hanging almost full, had risen above the shadowy rooftops. Moonlight shone down the broad thoroughfares of this city so recently designed and constructed.

Emperor Yuan Shizu, known in his language as Kublai Khan, had ordered it built as his capital near the site of old Yanjing, which his grandfather had razed during his conquest of the area. Called Khanbaliq, or City of the Khan, by his people, Dadu had been laid out on a grid. Under the emperor's iron rule, the streets were usually kept safe.

Not everyone feared the talk of demons on the streets. Even at this late hour, a peddler pushed his cart of goods past the house on creaking wheels. He called out his wares as he pounded on a hollow wooden block with a stick to draw attention.

For four nights in a row, Tianfeng had heard footsteps, nearly as light and quick as a cat, outside his window as he painted.

Perhaps the demon would bring him peace.

Tianfeng sipped his tea once more and set down the cup. He picked up a brush with a broad tip of sheep hair and dipped it into a small bowl of water. Then he stroked the broad, angled interior of the stone inkwell with the brush to leave the water in it. Placing the brush aside, he picked up his inkstick and ground the bottom end in the water, against the stone.

By day, Tianfeng worked as a minor clerk in the imperial court, keeping records with his calligraphy. Once hopeful of advancing as a scholar, he had since learned that the emperor had placed primarily Persians, Arabs, and Turks in high government places because he did not usually trust his Chinese subjects with such power. Tianfeng also knew that the woman he sought to meet and marry would never accept a mere clerk. Now Tianfeng painted at night, seeking in particular to learn the style of the great Zhao Mengfu, who rendered animals, and especially horses, with skill and verve.

The scholar and painter Zhao Mengfu was one of the relatively few Chinese literati who worked as an administrator for the emperor. The most accomplished scholar at court, he excelled at

essays and poetry as well as painting. Though he was the finest of horse painters, his landscapes were even more sophisticated. In the painting of bamboo, he was a master of the brushstroke *fei bai*, or flying white, which implied texture to the image. Tianfeng had hoped to seek him out one day as a mentor. However, Tianfeng had no painting yet that would display sufficient accomplishment to justify approaching this man.

A mild gust of wind rattled the open shutters and tossed the flame from the brass oil lamp. On the wall across from the window, one of Tianfeng's painted scrolls fluttered slightly where it hung. Painted after the style of Zhao Mengfu, it represented a couple of large, muscular horses prancing and nodding. It was not good enough to show the master.

In the distance, more peddlers knocked their sticks against their wooden blocks. Several streets away, a single horse clopped wearily up the street with wagon wheels squeaking behind it. The peddler who had walked up this street a moment ago had gone silent.

When the ink thickened to a jet black, Tianfeng set aside the ink stick. Then he selected a stiff, narrow brush of fox and deer hair and dipped it into the ink. He held it poised over the blank white scroll before him.

If he had no reason to live, he was wasting his time and effort.

Why paint another horse in the style of Zhao Mengfu if the demon might kill him tonight? Even if it did not, why seek to advance at court when he did not even know Zhao Mengfu? Why dream of advancement, when he had no way to marry the woman who drifted through his dreams?

"Why do you hesitate?" The voice came from a man standing outside the window, rough with the accent of a Mongol speaking Chinese.

Startled, Tianfeng jerked his head up to look.

Against the darkness outside, he saw a short, broad-shouldered man dressed in a tunic of worn, brown leather. The light of the oil lamp flickered across his smooth, unlined face. Long, white hair fell to his shoulders, and a narrow, white mustache and beard shone in the light, stark against his otherwise youthful appearance. He wore a conical cap of lacquered leather topped with a tuft of horsehair.

"If you would paint, do not let me stop you." The Mongol glared at him, his face flushed.

Tianfeng's heart pounded. He feared no demon more than a Mongol. The conquerors of the Middle Kingdom had slaughtered uncountable people and held all the power here now.

"You fear me." The Mongol spoke without ridicule or rancor.

Belatedly, Tianfeng remembered that he had no reason to live.

"Can you speak, scholar?"

"You have business here?" Tianfeng drew himself up. He would remind this Mongol that a scholar need not bow before a herder of horses.

"I have come to see you paint."

"You must be seeking another. No one knows I paint but Widow Li and the shopkeeper who sells me the paper, brushes, and ink."

"I have come to see you paint."

Tianfeng studied the Mongol's impassive face and white hair. His pulse quickened again. "You have watched me for the last four nights."

"I have."

"Well...come inside, then, and have some tea." Tianfeng gestured, wondering why he felt so much fear when he no longer wanted to live.

The Mongol turned his back, placed his hands on the window sill, and jumped to a sitting position on the sill. He drew up his short, bowed legs and spun around in a smooth motion. Then he extended his legs and dropped his booted feet inside. He wore a dagger at his belt, but no sword.

Tianfeng gestured to the cup of tea Widow Li had poured. "Join me?"

The Mongol ignored the tea. "What is your name?"

"I am Wu Tianfeng, a clerk in the court of the emperor." Tianfeng felt confident that even a Mongol would have to respect someone in the employ of the khan who had become emperor of the Middle

Kingdom. "And you?"

"Tuli, a younger son of Mongke Khan and nephew of Kublai Khan."

Tianfeng held his breath. Mongke Khan, the older brother of Kublai, had ruled the Mongols before him; Tuli was a Mongol prince, then, as well as a nephew of the emperor. He had no reason to be impressed by a clerk.

"Mongke Khan died some years before I was born," said Tianfeng. "Except for the white of your hair, you appear to be close to my age." "You doubt my word?" Tuli smiled slightly, amused rather than angry.

"How old are you?"

"I rode with Subotei Bahadur on his campaign with Batu Khan to the west," Tuli eyed Tianfeng for his response. "We rode through the Carpathian Mountains before destroying the Magyar host on the plain of Mohi and storming the city of Pest."

"I do not know these names," said Tianfeng softly. However, he knew that the campaign had taken place a generation before Mongke Khan had died. "You jest with me, friend. Even the youngest warrior on that campaign would have passed fifty years by now, and probably far more."

Tuli's eyes fixed on his. "I have seen more than sixty years, but they mean nothing. Since the night I fell and rose again in the Carpathian Mountains, no year has mattered to me more than another."

Tianfeng studied Tuli's face. "Are you a Daoist magician, then, to have so many years?"

"A Mongol—a Daoist magician?" Tuli laughed, and streaks of red shone on his yellowish teeth. "Ask the foolish peddler lying in the alley if I am a Daoist magician if you wish." He turned to the painting hanging on the opposite wall, but remained where he stood by the window.

"So there is no demon on these streets," Tianfeng whispered. "You are the one."

"No demon, young scholar? What makes you think I am no demon?"

"What do you want here?" Tianfeng asked quietly.

"I saw your horses through the window one night. They are proud and strong. Every Mongol loves horses."

"You merely came to see my painting?"

"Why do you paint horses?"

"I am learning the style of Zhao Mengfu, a great painter and an administrator in your uncle's court."

"You seek him as a mentor?"

"I have little hope of it."

"It is nothing to me in any case. You are a learned man, so I will ask you a question. Why do I fear a work of art?" Tuli folded his arms across his chest with a creak of leather. "Not your horses, scholar, but a statuette on the cart of a peddler across town. I avoided him. Very little frightened me before the night I met a demon in the Carpathian Mountains—and I assure you, scholar, that even less has frightened me since then."

"You fear a statuette?"

"Do I frighten you?" Tuli ignored the question as he gazed at the horses.

"I fear only that I shall never have the woman I seek," said Tianfeng.

"Ah, yes, a woman. And who would this woman be?"

"Her name is Bourtai. I see her in the palace sometimes."

"Bourtai is a Mongol name, not Chinese."

"She is a princess."

"Ah! I do not know her, but of course my uncle the khan has many wives and children. So you like her, eh? Does she favor you?"

"We have never spoken. I have watched her walk through the halls with her handmaidens, and she has smiled at me often behind her fan."

"Many a marriage has begun with less—but you rise above your station, scholar. Would my uncle smile on a clerk who courted a princess?"

"I fear only that he will not."

"You do not fear death?"

"Perhaps I would welcome it."

Tuli swung his head around, tossing his long, white hair, to peer sharply at Tianfeng. In the shadow behind him, the horsehair tuft twirled with the movement. "Would you? Are you so sure?"

"I have little chance of advancement. I have no real chance of courting Bourtai. And I am despised by most of the literati."

"You are despised by your own people—your own class?"

"By scholars who refuse to serve the foreign emperor. They live as beggars and wanderers rather than work at the court of your uncle." "They are men loyal to their own kind, and see you as a traitor."

"Yes."

"Maybe they have just been refused appointments." Tuli snickered. Startled, Tianfeng smiled also. "Perhaps."

"You have not answered my question. Why do I fear a statuette?"

"What did it represent?"

"He called her Guanyin."

"She is a bodhisattva—the essence of enlightenment, a soul who chose to postpone her nirvana in order to help others. She is the Goddess of Mercy. No one has reason to fear her."

"Perhaps I should seek her."

"Why would you seek what you fear?"

Tuli lowered his voice. "Maybe to be released."

"Released from what?"

"Do you paint her?" Tuli demanded, ignoring his question again. "I never have."

"You do only horses? What kind of painter are you?" Tuli scoffed.

"And what sort of demon are you?" Tianfeng spoke calmly, as though discussing a brush or an inkstick.

Tuli laughed. His teeth still showed red on their edges. "I like you, scholar—you do have little fear. I came here for blood four nights ago when I first saw your horses, but I have drunk tonight. As for me, I tell you that, until I came here, I have feared nothing but the sign of the Nestorian cross since I rode home from the Carpathians by moonlight, with a wagon of precious earth in a long box behind me."

"I do not understand you."

"Perhaps we can seek death together, scholar, but not tonight. I remain undecided—and for now, I have been too long in one place." With that, Tuli swung out of the window the way he had entered, and was gone.

A gentle breeze swayed the flame in the brass oil lamp.

DURING THE FOLLOWING DAY, TIANFENG thought of Tuli as he wrote his calligraphy in his cubicle and suffered the summer heat off the Gobi Desert. He

did not see Bourtai in the halls or on the court grounds anywhere. When he left work in the early evening, he walked along the streets among his fellow clerks, peddlers, soldiers, and common laborers on their way home.

As the dusty breeze finally cooled, and the sun threw long shadows of trees along the grounds of a small Buddhist temple, Tianfeng stepped over the wooden threshold and walked inside.

At the far wall, a large, bronze Buddha covered in gold leaf sat in calm contemplation. Smaller, long-eared Lohans lined the wall on each side, holding peaches, the sign of immortality. Sweet wisps of incense wandered out of standing brass burners.

Worshippers stood before the Buddha, making sacrifices. Other people crowded behind them. Tianfeng had never seen the temple so crowded except on sacred days.

A Buddhist priest walked up to Tianfeng, his robe flowing with the movement. Tall and gaunt, with high cheekbones and a strong brow, he bowed in greeting. "Welcome, Master Wu. Have you come to make a sacrifice?"

"Of course," said Tianfeng with a slight bow. "In truth, I also came to ask you for advice."

"How can I advise you?"

"Everyone talks of a demon stalking the streets of Dadu at night."

"I have heard the talk. Fear of this demon has brought many people here for prayers and sacrifices in recent weeks."

"What kind of demon is it?"

"Many are asking that." The priest frowned, exaggerating his brow. "From what I have heard, it may be one in which a human corpse has been invaded by a demon spirit. This demon spirit can prevent the body from the rot of the grave by feeding on other corpses or on living people. When that occurs, the *po*—the lower soul—becomes one with the demon."

"If that demon walked and talked, would it appear to be human?"

"According to wise men, such a demon is covered with white hair, perhaps with a greenish tinge. It will have glaring eyes and long claws."

"Yet it was human before."

"I have also heard that these corpses may simply have white hair, or show some partial rot from the grave. They may have white faces before they feed, and a rosy glow afterward." The priest shook his head. "It is all talk. I have never seen such a demon."

"I hear the demon among us now only appears at night."

"Yes, this demon would sleep in its grave during daylight."

"Could this demon have come from afar? Perhaps with the Mongol conquerors who rode across the world and back?"

Surprised, the priest raised his eyebrows. "Perhaps it did."

"Or maybe they brought back another demon, but similar in kind."

The priest eyed Tianfeng curiously. "You are a learned man, Master Wu. Do you have some knowledge of this matter?"

"No. I only seek an answer to the puzzle." Tianfeng worried that he had revealed too much. "A fruitseller died near my home several nights ago. A peddler was found in an alley on my block only this morning. They were not eaten, but drained of blood."

"You have reason to take care, then."

"If the demon and the spirit of the dead person have merged, what would the person feel? Would the original human spirit want to live this way, or be put to final rest?"

"You ask wise questions, master; most people only fear the demon."

The priest drew in a long breath and let it out. "This unfortunate spirit is possessed and wants to be free, but he is driven by the demon."

"He might war within himself?"

"I believe so."

"I see," said Tianfeng thoughtfully. "What would stop such a demon?"

"The grace of Buddha and good karma from one's last life." The priest smiled gently. "As a learned man, you have such karma, I believe."

"What about the demon himself? How would Guanyin deal with him?"

"The bodhisattva? What do you mean?"

"I am not certain what I mean," Tianfeng said carefully. "Would a demon fear her for some reason?"

"Any demon must fear the great Goddess of Mercy," said the priest. He nodded over Tianfeng's shoulder toward the side of the temple.

Tianfeng turned and saw a large, wooden statue of Guanyin, covered in gold, by the side wall. Dressed in the style of India with a tunic, leggings, and flowing sashes, she sat barefoot on a wooden pedestal in a casual position, leaning on one arm with a leg drawn up, the other arm resting on her raised knee. Her placid, oval face bore a slight smile.

A crowd of worshippers had gathered before her, as well.

"What would bring the grace of Guanyin to a worshipper?" asked Tianfeng.

"The Goddess of Mercy sees those who suffer." The priest paused to admire her statue himself. "I believe she may feel in particular for those who work the hardest, risk the greatest loss, and sacrifice the most for others."

"Do you know about an item called a Nestorian cross?" Tianfeng asked.

"It is the sacred symbol of Nestorian Christians." The priest lowered his voice. "Many of the Mongols, including the emperor, look favorably on them. The Nestorians come from the West."

"They are few in number here in the Middle Kingdom, are they not?"

"Very few."

"So their crosses are rare here, as well. What do they look like?"

"Merely a tall cross. Sometimes their god hangs on it."

"That is too vague to be of use."

"What use, Master?"

"Forgive me, but I have no time to explain. I must send Widow Li to the market and then I will return here with my painting materials." Tianfeng glanced at the crowd of people near the Buddha and reached into the pouch at his sash. "I cannot wait to make a sacrifice, but I offer this donation." He pressed a piece of silver into the priest's hand.

"You are too generous." The priest bowed. "I shall light incense and offer a prayer for you."

Tianfeng hurried away, his robe swirling.

AFTER GIVING WIDOW LI COINS AND instructions to shop in the market, Tianfeng returned to the temple with his scroll of rice paper, brushes, inkstick,

inkwell, and small water dishes. At Tianfeng's request, the priest instructed his acolytes to bring out a small table and chair so that Tianfeng could sit before the image of Guanyin. The acolytes also served him tea as he laid out his paper, wetted the inkwell, and ground his ink.

Tianfeng painted with the greatest care he had ever taken. He "treasured ink like gold," in the words of old critics, using narrow strokes with thick, nearly dry ink rather than the light, generous ink washes used by the fine Song Dynasty landscapists. He kept tight, precise lines and followed the gentle curves and sweeps of the statue before him, avoiding rigidity and stiffness. To bring the attention of the goddess herself, her likeness would have to reflect her true nature. Unlike the powerful, prancing horses on his wall, Guanyin required a mood of quietude and care.

As more frightened people pressed into the temple at the end of their workday to pray and make sacrifices, Tianfeng sipped his tea and continued painting. His thick ink dried almost as soon as he laid it down. Gradually, as the candles and oil lamps in the temple burned down and the worshippers hurried home before night could fall, Tianfeng leaned back in his chair to examine his work. His scroll of Guanyin was complete.

A SHORT TIME LATER, TIANFENG SAT alone at his dining table, watching the brilliant red glow of sunset through the open west window. The east window

was shuttered tightly. Nearly finished with dinner, he picked up a small wheat bun with his hand and dipped it into a dish of soy sauce. He expected Tuli would return after dark.

Widow Li stopped in the doorway from the kitchen.

"Come in, Widow Li."

"I did not mean to disturb you, young master. Have you finished?"

"Almost. Have you heard any more about the demon today?"

She twisted her hands together uncomfortably. "A peddler was killed last night near here. Please, please tie the shutters tonight."

"I heard about the peddler, too, but I hear none on the street now. The word has spread." Tianfeng sipped his tea. "How are your preparations?"

"The goose is boiled and the fish is steamed. The pork shoulder must boil longer. The fresh wheat buns are cooling. I have cleaned the wine pot and cups." Widow Li hesitated uncertainly. "Where will you conduct the sacrifice? Before what idol?"

"In my private room." Tianfeng gestured for her to take the dishes.

"Where your new painting hangs?"

"Yes. Set the altar beneath the painting and leave it for me."

"Yes, young master." Widow Li bowed and withdrew to the kitchen.

Tianfeng looked out the window. The sun had almost dropped below the horizon. He did not have much time.

In his private room, by the light of the single, burning oil lamp, Tianfeng looked at his painting where it hung on the wall; for the moment, his horses had been rolled up and set aside. In his lines of varied curve and texture, Guanyin sat in the same position as the sculpture, her knee up and her arm resting on it; she appeared casual and kind, with the hint of a gentle smile. He had added a puff of drifting clouds beneath her, as befitted a goddess. Now he only hoped his painting would meet with her approval.

Tianfeng saw that Widow Li had placed all of the dishes prepared for sacrifice on a small table beneath the scroll. She had even poured wine into the cups. Knowing he had little time, he placed a small bronze incense burner on the makeshift altar and lit the incense. As the sweet smoke rose, attracting good spirits, he remembered that in some celebrations, he would light firecrackers to drive away evil spirits. Tonight, however, he wanted a certain demon to return.

Quickly, he made the proper obeisances to Guanyin, offering the food and wine in sacrifice to her. He prayed for her aid and mercy, then poured the wine cups onto the floor in a line before his feet. Tinkling at every gust of wind and rattle of the shutters, he then snuffed the incense, set it aside, and opened the door to his room.

"Widow Li, I am finished. Please take the dishes to the kitchen."

Outside, not a single peddler struck his block and called out his wares.

Widow Li came promptly. As she picked up the dishes of goose and pork and the wine pot, he rolled up his scroll of Guanyin and carefully tied it shut, leaving it hanging on the wall. He was moving the small table back to its normal position as she returned for the remaining dishes.

"I suggest you retire for the night, Widow Li," said Tianfeng. "In any case, I do not wish to be disturbed."

Widow Li bowed, now burdened by the dishes of wheat buns and fish, and hurried away.

Tianfeng closed the door behind her. The aroma of the incense remained in the room, but the breeze from the open window lessened it. Behind him, a couple of light steps outside were followed quickly by a creak of wood and the heavy thump of boots on the floor.

Tianfeng whirled, startled, but not surprised.

"You've been burning incense, scholar." Tuli's eyes glittered in the light of the flame as his white hair tossed in the breeze from the window.

"You fear no incense." Tianfeng faced him calmly, though his pulse pounded again. Now, without the desk between them, they stood close.

"I like the smell of incense." Tuli glanced at the cold incense burner. "It has burned down."

"It has burned down." Tianfeng studied him. Tonight, Tuli's face was nearly as white as his hair and mustache.

Tuli looked Tianfeng in the eye. "You did not see your princess today, scholar."

"No. Bourtai did not pass near me today."

"I wished to see this relative of mine. After sundown tonight, I visited my uncle's court. I have not greeted him in a long time. Then I sought out Bourtai."

"What?" Tianfeng had not expected this. "Why? Did you speak of me?"

Tuli laughed. "You care so much, scholar? Why do you bother, if you might welcome death?"

"With hope of courting Bourtai, perhaps I would not."

"I said nothing of such hope." Tuli sneered, his teeth clean in the yellowish lamplight.

"What do you want here tonight?" Tianfeng demanded.

"I said we might seek death together, scholar." Staring into Tianfeng's eyes, Tuli licked the edges of his teeth. "I used much energy

last night. I thirst again."

Tianfeng turned away, fighting panic. Tuli stood between him and his desk. "Last night, you asked about Guanyin. I visited a Buddhist temple today."

Tuli studied him, the horsehair tuft on his helmet swaying slightly in the breeze. "In the land of the Magyars, I learned that only the mystic sign of the Christians stopped those such as I. Why do I fear Guanyin?"

"I am no sage," said Tianfeng. "Did you not see many paintings and statues of gods and goddesses in your sixty years?"

"In truth, I did not. Since I returned from the Carpathians, I have wandered mostly among the tribes of the Gobi. My Mongol kin worship a single, all-powerful god in the sky. In the windswept steppes and desert, I faced very few Buddhas and bodhisattvas—and I avoid the Nestorians. My uncle, the Great Khan, has a liking for Nestorians, but they are scarce here."

"Is that why you came here to Dadu?"

"In part. Wherever I have lived, I have raised the suspicions of people around me. I must keep on the move."

"So you, too, flee from harm—though you might seek death."

Tuli twirled one strand of his white mustache and smiled again as the flickering light played across his face. "We may be two of a kind, scholar."

"Answer my question. What do you want here tonight?"

"Tell me more of that bodhisattva."

"You fear Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy. Perhaps only a demon would fear her."

"You are weary of life, too, scholar. Yet you have had little of it, by my count."

"You are weary of life, but you fear to give it up." Tianfeng raised his gaze. "Tell me, Prince Tuli, nephew of the emperor Yuan Shizu—who are you in truth? A Mongol soldier who is possessed—or a demon fit only for the seventh hell, which is reserved for eaters of human flesh and desecrators of graves?"

Tuli's eyes widened angrily and he took a step forward. "You seek death, scholar?"

"Do you?" Tianfeng stared back at him.

"I thirst, scholar. And I have heard no peddlers on the streets tonight."

Tianfeng stood before him, cold with fear. Those who risked the greatest loss, the priest had said, were among those the Goddess might favor. If Guanyin would grace them tonight, she would have to do so soon. Shaking with fear, Tianfeng extended his right arm and drew back the sleeve with his left hand.

"You thirst, Mongol prince? I will not flee. Are you a Mongol or a demon?"

Tuli glared down at his neck, not his wrist, his face in a grimace.

Tianfeng watched him in terror, unable to breathe.

Tuli licked the edges of his teeth and leaned forward slightly.

Tianfeng reached up with his other hand. He fumbled, then pulled free the knot that held the scroll fast. It unrolled down the wall, revealing his painting of Guanyin.

Startled, Tuli glanced up at the clear, black lines that defined the Goddess of Mercy on her pedestal in the clouds, casual and kind. First his eyes widened with anger. Then, as though puzzled, he hesitated. At last his face relaxed.

Shuddering with effort, Tuli drew in a deep breath and straightened back up again.

"I am Tuli, son of Mongke Khan."

The breeze rose suddenly, rattling the shutters and fluttering the scroll on the wall. The flame in the oil lamp danced and leaned. Beneath Tuli's helmet of lacquered leather, his shoulder-length white hair and long, white mustache tossed.

The wind swirled around Tuli. The Mongol prince stood motionless, caressed by the breeze. He closed his eyes and fell to the floor.

Tianfeng, fascinated in his fear, looked down. On the floor, Tuli's body lay limp and still in the beating rush of air, his face at peace. In a moment, he became only dust, and the swirling wind carried it all

Continued on page 85

*A best-selling author buckles his swashes
for a dash through some pretty remarkable
territory. Hold on to your broadswords,
and guard your honor closely—
you'll need both.*

A Matter of Honor

BY CHRIS BUNCH

Illustration by Todd Lockwood

MY DEAREST OMERYE,
I am writing this in the hopes that it may somehow reach you. I have been promised by Dangom that he shall exert all energies to make sure this missive is delivered to one of the tribes who trade with what he calls the godless scum of the cities, with instructions to send it on.

Unfortunately, I must warn you there's a good chance I shall be dead when you read this. I am writing it not only as a way of sending my last love, but of keeping up my own spirits.

I will make an aside to my sister, Rali. Mount a punitive expedition if you wish, and I shall attempt to give you clues, since Dangom cannot read Orissan, or so he says. I'm hardly the forgiving sort when it comes to my murder, but don't think there's any hope of rescuing me. I shall continue writing until the last minute before giving this to Dangom to send to Jeypur.

Don't abandon hope, however. I've been in worse situations, even though, at the moment, I don't seem to be able to recollect any, and escaped.

You might, in fact, be slightly cheered already, since I would imagine those careless bastards who allowed my caravan to be ambushed by these people who call themselves the Adigrat have probably said I was killed in the skirmish.

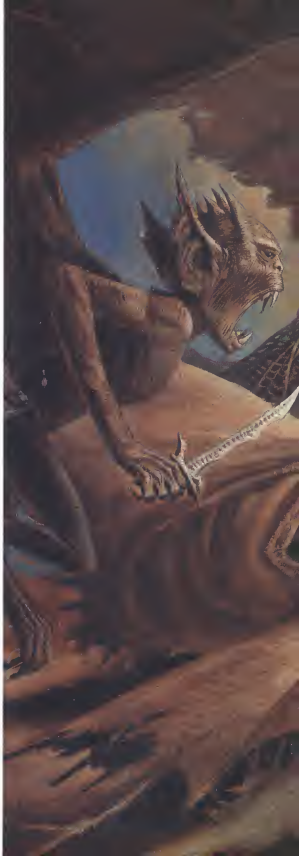
I was not—the Adigrat may be barbarians of the desert, but they knew well what they wished, and quite smoothly accomplished their task, which was to acquire a suitably noble captive.

At first I thought they planned to ransom me, given the caution they took to make sure I was not killed, and I relaxed. We Anteros have been captured and ransomed before, and shall be again, and it generally puts no more than a dent in our treasury.

But, alas, such is not their intent.

To get the matter out of the way as quickly as possible, they are going to eat me as the grand sacrifice in their Festival of Life, which occurs about a month from this day.

But I shall begin at the beginning. Frankly, I should have been more careful when I hired the caravan guards in Jeypur, but I was





Arrows whirred, men screamed and died, in panic, and a cleverly slung stone knocked and I knew no more. I came to trussed like

in a hurry to set out, seeing nearly a quarter of the trading season already behind me. Several expeditions had already been outfitted and set out from that city of scoundrels, and so the available talent was scarce. I should have hired raw farm boys and trained them as we traveled, but did not, instead hiring a bunch of skulkers unworthy of the rusty swords they carried.

My intent, as you know, was to strike west, along the Lemon Coast, then up into the unexplored interior, hoping to find rich trading opportunities beyond the already-known desert.

My caravan was quite impressive—forty camels and twenty-seven horses and riders, with another two dozen men on foot. That was my downfall—I looked entirely too prosperous. The camels' packs were full of every conceivable trading good, since I didn't know whether I'd be dealing with savages or hopefully with beings as civilized as the Irayans of the Far Kingdoms.

The ground grew flatter, the temperature hotter, and the springs fewer between, and after two weeks we were in the heart of the wasteland, having turned straight north from the Lemon Coast promontory called the Old Woman's Head. Thus far I'd seen no signs of my hoped-for trader's dream, an undiscovered city with wonderful goods unknown to we Orissans.

Instead, we were ambushed. The Adigrat knew exactly what they were doing, attacking in the late afternoon, just as we sighted a green oasis that would make a perfect camp. They struck from both sides, first riding out of the setting sun; then, when we reeled to the east, sending in their foot soldiers from the draws they'd hidden in.

Arrows whirled, men screamed and died, horses neighed in panic, and a cleverly slung stone knocked me from my saddle and I knew no more.

I came to trussed like a fowl, sitting near a roaring fire. It amuses me to hear, in some romance, when the hero is clouted on the head and wakes alert, cheerful and ready to trade badinage or swordplay with the villain. I spent an hour or so vomiting, seeing two campfires and two sets of captors swimming about me before things returned, shakily, to normal.

The leader of the raiders was Dangom, who is both the Adigrat's chief and lead sorcerer. He spoke, badly, the trading language that is used around Jeypur. I asked to have my bonds loosened so I could cast the Spell of Tongues. He laughed.

"You think Dangom fool? So you sorcerer, eh? I unloose you... you cast spell... then we your prisoners. You eat us then, eh, instead of what is proper? No. No. That will not happen."

That was the first clue I had to the Adigrat's dietary tastes. I told him of course not, I was but trying to ease matters, but he refused. It wasn't, in fact, for some days that I was able to repeat the spell Gameleon gave Rali, and then could speak their language freely. I shall not, however, continue to write our talk as the broken pidgin it was.

There were two others from my caravan taken as well and I was told they'd proceed me before the Festival, but the honor... "very great honor, greatest of all,"... would be mine.

I told them I was unworthy, but Dangom would have none of it. Their spies had watched every caravan leaving Jeypur, waiting for just the right one, a man of riches, a nobleman, a lord of his own land. They had known I was the right man for them, seeing my red hair from a distance, and I vowed to shave my head before I set out into the wilds again.

The next day we moved north, deeper into the wasteland, accom-

panied by the women, children and sheep who'd been hidden in the oasis before the ambush was laid. Behind me roared great fires—the Adigrat had taken none of my trade goods, but had piled and fired them. I winced to see gems and gold coins cast into the fire, and forced the stars I'd seen the night before into memory, so I could use a skilled desert navigator to return to this place, assuming I somehow survived.

As we traveled I learned a bit more about the Adigrat. They were nomads, and had no home beyond their tents, save the Great Gathering Place of Nurri—our destination—where they gather once a year with the other branches of the tribe, to celebrate and sacrifice to their god, Keos. I asked what he looked like, and was told no one knew; he was invisible and all about us, but his sometimes-home, where they worshiped him most fervently, was a huge black stele that sat alone in the desert.

"You will be a fitting gift for a god so great," one of Dangom's men, a warrior named Pemba, told me. I was more interested in the events before I was to be honored, and asked what else would occur at this Great Gathering. I suggested sharing news, trading, and was struck across the face.

"We are warriors," he snarled. "Not city-trash. We do not trade, must not trade, for fear Keos will turn his face away from us. If you ever suggest we would do such a thing, I will beat you bloody, even though Dangom will punish me harshly."

I begged apology, said I meant no harm, but that I was an ignorant foreigner and wanted to learn as much as possible about the Adigrat, since I was to be, literally, the centerpiece of their ceremony. How, I asked gently, did someone get something he fancied? Perhaps they had great magic and Dangom could duplicate it?

Pemba looked at me closely to make sure I wasn't jesting, then said, "No wizard has that power, outsider. No. We either take what we want—woman, sheep, spear—or else it is given us as a gift."

But weren't there things the tribe wanted that others had, things that wouldn't be given, nor could they be taken by force? Such as? Pemba wanted to know. I suggested spices, wine, brandy, fine clothing. He said they had none of those, and needed none. Their clothing was woven from their sheep as was their meat. Their weapons and horses were taken from their enemies. All else was forbidden, and if they lusted after it, Keos would turn his face from them.

As we rode on that day, and on the days following, I developed a tentative scheme. Perhaps, if I sounded sufficiently noble, they might relent, and decide I was too great to sacrifice as a mere dinner. It was feeble, but I started talking about my lands, my herds, the warriors who obeyed me, the ships I owned, and, yes, since these men practice multiple marriage, my many wives. My apologies, Omerye, but it seemed necessary at the time.

One night, the first of my men was killed. The manner of his death was merciful—he was handed a waterskin and, as he lifted his head to drink, a knife whipped across his throat and he went down gushing blood. But what came seconds later wasn't merciful—the poor camel-driver was hung from a tripod of poles, gutted and butchered as if he was one of the tribe's ewes. I forced myself to keep watching. Anything I learned might serve to save my life. I am sorry to be specific, but what happened may be important, and so I'm setting it down as much to commit it to my memory as to sicken you, my love.

A great pot was set to boil and his innards tossed into it, with a handful of salt. After boiling, the innards were discarded, except for

horses neighed me from my saddle a fowl...

heart and liver, which were broiled on sticks and given to Dangom and his sub-chiefs. The guts provided what seasoning the stew had, and the poor dismembered man was tossed in, allowed to boil, and then, after prayers and chants, served. This meat gives the Adigrat great powers over their enemies and isn't, of course, eaten solely for nourishment.

That was less than two hours ago, and I'm still sickened, unable to sleep. I must not allow myself to die in this manner, I've resolved.

THIS IS WRITTEN THREE DAYS LATER, AS WE GET CLOSER TO Nurri. Last night, the second of my men was killed and devoured in the same manner as his mate. Once more, I made myself watch, and an idea came. I considered it well during the night, and by the next morning I had a tentative plan.

Dangom came at the noon rest and said he would do me the honor of eating with me. I hasten to add that we were having cheese made from sheep's milk—milk and flat bread—and no more. I said he could do as he wished, but he was hardly honoring me. He glowered, and Pemba, who was beside him, half drew his sword. Dangom asked why I felt that way, since in days before he and I had shared the same patch of sand. What had happened?

"I saw how you shamed my servant."

"When? When we sacrificed him to Keos? But that is our custom. You have seen it before. How dare you criticize our way?" Pemba's sword was now fully drawn.

I shrugged, although I was sweating inside my tunic, wondering if a wrong word would make me an unworthy sacrifice to Keos...but a fitting one for Pemba's steel.

"When my people sacrifice, they consider the ways of the one they're giving to the gods," I lied, not feeling he needed to know that in Orissa only criminals are given to Te-Date, and that but seldom in the Kissing of the Stones.

"What," Dangom snapped. "You expect a sacrifice to go willingly?"

"Not necessarily, although our gods are more honored when that is the case. But at least, when we give foreigners to the gods, we try to ensure their own customs are followed."

"Are you saying that you Orissans also consume the flesh of men?"

"No. We have not for many generations. But when we did, we gave our victims the right to choose their own death...and to choose the sacrifice itself," I emphasized.

"I do not understand."

"Don't you think a man should be greater than a sheep?"

"Of course."

"Then how can you cook him as if he had four legs and you'd but recently sheared him for his wool, giving his spirit no honor?"

Dangom thought hard.

"I understand," he said, grudgingly. "You have a good point, Amalric Antero."

"So you see why I do not feel honored by your presence. Am I not the greatest man you have ever captured?"

"I can attest you are, and not from your stories, for all men love to brag, but from the way you bear yourself and the way you learned to speak our tongue so rapidly," Dangom said.

"Then," I said, "if you shame a poor camel rider as you did, how

much greater will you humiliate me in the manner of my sacrifice?" Dangom scowled, then stood up.

"I must think on this," he said and, leaving his meal untouched, walked out into the desert.

The next morning, Pemba kicked me awake just at dawn, and brought me before the sorcerer.

He had figures drawn in the sand, and was muttering over them. Occasionally he would touch one with a wand made of some sort of tree-branch.

"Amalric Antero," he said. "I have thought long on what you said, and decided to cast our fortune to Keos, to see what should be done. Keos will answer. Watch how these figures change. When I am finished, I shall read them and determine what should be done."

He began chanting, dancing back and forth in front of the figures. I felt a breeze around me, although the morning had been still.

I know you and Rali swear I have a bit of The Talent, which I deny, and we've argued it back and forth. But at that moment, I wished I was wrong, and tried to remember some of the incantations I'd learned. Nothing came, and so I attempted one of my own. I knelt behind Dangom, picked up a bit of sand and allowed it to trail through my fingers. I whispered low, so no one could hear me:

There is nothing, sand becomes sand

Wind will die, gods turn away

Sand remains sand, gods remain gods

Invisible

Unheard

THE WIND DIED. JANOS GREYCLOAK WOULD HAVE CHORTLED, not believing in any gods, nor am I sure of their existence, and for nothing to happen is hardly proof of wizardly ability. Dangom chanted on and on, louder and louder, but the figures drawn in the sand remained as they were, unchanged.

Dangom broke off suddenly and turned to me. Looking worried, he said, "Keos will not answer."

"Perhaps that means he thinks you a great wizard who can reach his own decision with no help."

"Ah! That could be true."

He helped me to my feet, and we returned to where we'd camped. The column was ready to move on.

"So, if you were me, what would you do? Do not jest and say release you, of course."

"What would I do? I would ask my wishes and, unless they were absurd, follow them and pay me a true honor when I go before Keos."

"That was well spoken. Go on."

I told him what I desired, and he grew red with anger, and shock. He shouted me to silence once, and I obeyed. Then he sulked for a few moments, and told me to go on. When I came to the matter of gold, he shook, as if I'd cursed his god, but said nothing. When I finished, he was breathing hard.

"This is a terrible thing you have asked of me."

"To do honor before gods frequently requires terrible tasks. The greater the god, the more terrible the duty. We even have one god in my city who can only be worshipped by those who have chosen to kill their entire family before coming before him." I looked closely when I said that, but he just nodded.

"I have heard of such a custom," the man said, and I began to respect a liar even more grandiose than I.

"Very well. If honor you we must, honor you we shall." He shouted for his warriors to assemble around him, and told the women we would not be moving on that day. Instead, there were special tasks to perform. Within the hour, riders went south. The fish had taken my bait, and the honor of Dangom and his god, Keos, must be held by meeting my own.

He grudgingly agreed to leave this message with someone who would "see it reaches the proper hands," so it's obvious the nomads aren't completely untouched by civilization.

We shall see what we shall see...but I'm no longer quite as afraid of the stewpot as I was. I shall send another message as soon as I am able.

I love you, and wish I were with you.
Amalric

MY DEAREST OMERYE,
Two weeks have passed since I sent off my first letter, and we are now at Nurri, in the great gathering place of the Adigrat nation, if a dozen or more wandering tribes can be so described.

My trap is baited and set.

I know the manner of its setting has already had an effect on Dangom's people. They do not carry themselves as proudly as they did before, and there are frequent arguments, not only between warriors, but between a man and his wife. Further proof was that I saw a gold medallion hanging around the neck of a woman who had no such decoration before Dangom's riders went south to do my bidding.

Tomorrow shall tell the tale, I hope. If there is any more in this missive, then I have survived.

If not, I went to the Dark Seeker with my last thoughts of you, and all the happiness we have had, my dearest.

CIRCUMSTANCES HAVE CHANGED.

I am no longer dinner.

I am, however, a slave, but consider that a vast improvement.

Almost three weeks have gone by since I was last able to write, and it has taken this long for me to get permission from my master to scrawl words on paper. He can no more read them than Dangom could, but seems impressed by my knowledge. But to return to what happened at the camp at Nurri.... Each tribe had its meat-sacrifice for the Festival, but I was the greatest, and Dangom was the object of great envy. Their Council of Chiefs announced that I would be the first offering. I almost wrote first course, by the way.

The tribes gathered around the stele, and after prayers I was brought before them, and stripped. My red hair brought startled exclamations, and I heard tribesmen call that this day would bring great honor to them from Keos.

Then the rest of the materials necessary for my sacrifice were brought out, and this was when my trap was sprung. I was pouring sweat, sure my little scheme would not work.

The items set behind me were the traditional cooking pot, a brass-bound wooden box, the butchering tripod, and the makings of a fire.

Pemba would have the honor of killing me, and Dangom would do the cooking. As I'd requested, the box was opened, and each article in it was taken out and handed to me, for my "blessing." Actually, I held it high to make sure all the tribesmen noted the items and called its name. The first went without comment, but I heard a murmur at the second, and then as I lifted the third and fourth, shouts of rage came from the assemblage.

It was exactly as I had intended. Dangom turned, looking worried, as four of his fellow chiefs ran up, hands on their swords.

"What means this?" the longest bearded, and sworded, demanded.

"My sacrifice has demanded he be treated with honor," Dangom said. "This is his doing."

"You have sinned, Dangom!" another chief blurted, looking at the apparatus. "You have gone to the cities!"

"Only to the outskirts of one, and it was not much more than a village. But what else could I do?"

At that point the shouting grew louder and other tribesmen came forward to add their opinions while Dangom tried to explain.

What I had done was very simple. If I was to be killed and eaten with honor, then I demanded the right to specify how that was to be done.

I'd told Dangom that I was to be seasoned and then grilled with spices and sauces; in short, cooked as one of my own country's ceremonial dishes.

He knew not what seasoning was, so I told him. I told him of wild onions and garlic, which he could find at any oasis, and thus bind me more closely to Keos. But there would be other spices needed that could only be gotten in marketplaces.

For these, he would need gold, which the Adigrat scorned. So,

when the riders went south they had to dig through the ashes of my trade goods to find coins and jewels. Then they rode on, and found a village.

They returned with what they'd been sent for, the items in that box. There were tomatoes, cabbages, bean curd, all kept fresh with preservative spells, and the makings of several sauces, from fish oil and hot pepper to ginger and fermented bean to pepper and vinegar, all intended for me to be dipped in before consumption. It had also been necessary to purchase some very sharp filleting knives.

But it was evident his riders had found other uses for my gold, which I'd noted when I saw that ornament hanging around one of the Adigrat women's necks. I had, indeed, brought the sins of the cities upon them.

They knew it as well. I might have convinced Dangom, and his men obeyed him, but in their hearts they knew they were sinning.

Now, as their fellows shouted scorn, the entire tribe fully realized their shame, and men began weeping, wailing, tearing their hair.

Dangom was still protesting, his voice getting louder and louder. Suddenly he screamed, threw up his hands, and blood gouted.

*Suddenly he screamed
gouted. He staggered
who'd stabbed him in*

He staggered forward, and fell, and the tribesman who'd stabbed him in the back pulled his sword free.

The long-bearded one shouted approval, and the killer started toward me. But I was ready.

"Stop!" I belted. "How dare you shame Keos?"

That stopped the swordsman, and the elder gaped as well.

"Dangom chose me as a sacrifice, and now you are denying Keos the gift of my life?"

That got loud outcries. "You heathen," the bearded elder shouted, "how dare you tell us what our god wants? You are the one who's brought shame on the Adigrat, and must pay for the sin with your life!"

"Why? Because I insisted, as a man of honor, that I be killed in a fitting manner? How is that a sin?"

"Because you forced us to do something that is forbidden, and now it is likely Keos will turn his face away."

"I do not know that," I retorted. "But I do know he will reach out and smite you if you kill me, his chosen."

Now the argument commenced. It raged on, and while I waited to see if I was to live or not, I strolled over to the box, salted one of the tomatoes and began eating it. I may have been moments from death, but I would not go to the Seeker with my stomach holding no more than mutton, cheese, and unleavened bread.

I sat down, not far from Dangom's body, and tried listening, but gave it up in boredom—these barbarians argued with all the circular nonsense I heard Orissan priests use in my boyhood, but with none of their subtlety and education.

Eventually the elder, who I'd heard referred to as Hasa, seemed to make up his mind. He looked at me suspiciously, gathered the other old men together, and they whispered away. I grew worried. Then the conclave broke up, and Hasa strode over to me.

"We have reached a decision."

I rose to my feet.

"You are right," Hasa said. "You are sealed to Keos, and we cannot take your life for other reasons. But your behavior has not only shamed us, but desecrated your value as well, so you are no longer

fit to provide the Great Meal of the Gods."

"So there is nothing left to do but release me," I suggested.

"No," Hasa said. "You think us even greater fools than that dead dog whose name was Dangom?" He spat on the corpse. "No. You forced us to touch gold, and that shall be your doom."

I shuddered, remembering tales of a rich merchant captured by savages whose purse of coins was melted and given him for a last, molten drink.

"We shall not kill you, not letting your blood further defile us. We shall sell you," and Hasa's lips curled when he used the unfamiliar word. "And you shall rue the day you were not permitted to join Keos in a joyful embrace! We have lost much of our honor, and must lose no more. So we must get rid of you, before your honeyed words can force us into greater sins!"

That same day I was tied to a swift horse, and four riders took me deeper into the desert, for three days, traveling north by northeast now, I guessed.

A brown, dried mountain range rose up from the desert haze, and we rode until we reached its foothills.

staggered and fell.

Before I could pick myself up, the figure lifted me, threw me over his shoulder, and started running away, into the darkness, into the hills, his mates behind him.

I was in the hands of the Men of the Mountains.

Giants.

AS YOU KNOW, I'D ENCOUNTERED GIANTS ONCE BEFORE, when Janos Greycloak and I sought the Far Kingdoms, and the one I'd encountered had been a very primitive, stupid and peaceful creature, easily pacified with sweets and children's baubles.

These giants are a bit more civilized and smarter, or so I believe.

As I said, I am a slave now, the property of a giant named Lombok, his brother Morea, and their shared wife Jehoi. Lombok is a chief of sorts among these beings, but I don't know yet whether he is the chief or a sub-leader.

The giants live high in these serene mountains, in homes cut into the stone that have been theirs for thousands of years. Once more the

*ed, threw up his hands, and blood
forward, and fell, and the tribesman
the back pulled his sword free.*

We stopped in the ruins of a village. "Here there were once people," the head of the riders said. "They came too close to the Men of the Mountains, and were slain. Now we shall allow them to have you as well."

I asked who these Men of the Mountains were as the Adigrat pulled me from my horse and tied me securely to a ruined pillar, but received no answer. My arms were left free, but the ropes around my legs and waist were cleverly tied so I could not squirm far enough to reach them.

A loaf of bread and a skin of water were left beside me.

"We shall leave the village, and wait beyond. It may take a day, or two days, but your doom is sealed."

"What will you get for me," I asked. "More gold, to further shame you?"

I was growing too cocky, and was paid for my pride—the man spat full in my face.

"We shall receive good, hard steel, spearheads, and blades to fashion swords or knives around, and such things, pig."

I wiped my face.

"Do you know what the Men of the Mountains do with those you sell to them?"

"I do not. But I hope it is something so painful you will scream for days and think fondly of how you sinned and were not blessed by Keos."

They rode away, and I began trying to wriggle the ropes around, but without success. At dusk I drank a bit of the water and had a couple mouthfuls of the bread, determined to make them last as long as possible.

I guess I dozed, because I awoke with a jolt, hearing sandals grate against the rock around me, and seeing figures bulk out of the night, and smelling the reek of unwashed bodies.

Guttural snarls came, and I heard clanks, as if someone had dropped several pieces of metal nearby. Something enormous came toward me, and I raised my hands, ready to fight for my life.

The figure went behind me, and I heard the whisper of a knife coming from its sheath, and then my bonds were cut away, and I

Spell of Tongues has proven its value, for after a day I was able to work it and communicate easily with these huge beings.

Their pride is working in their mines, dug deep below their homes, then smelting the ore into metal and blacksmithing weapons from it. They trade these weapons, mainly with people to the east and west, using the same secretive methods they used with me. They fear and loathe normal-sized men, and will only be around them when they're slaves.

The mountains are surprisingly thick with game, and this is cooked or salted, dried and then eaten, but their main staple is barley, which they grow in fields that have been laboriously created on terraces along the hills. This is boiled, salted, sweetened or spiced. The farming is the reason for slaves, for these giants have a peculiar custom: They fear the day, and are nocturnal creatures. So the slaves are driven out into the fields to work while guards watch over them with spears, not, I have discovered for fear we'll escape, but to protect us. From what, I asked, and was backhanded for my question and told from what lives in the skies, and then ordered to never speak of that again, lest my words draw them down on us.

Their third great fear is magic and wizards, and I knew better, from their horrified looks when I mentioned sorcery once, than to ask where that horror came from.

I was now part of The Way, which had existed without change since the gods created us, and would be the same until the sun went dark, one of my fellow laborers told me.

I suspect that the lands to the east and west of these mountains must be fairly poor, since my fellow slaves are a rather sordid lot.

I find it most ironic being one, since I was the man who set the landslide in motion to free the slaves of Orissa. Perhaps Te-Date is punishing me, since it took time for me to realize the terrible transgression of holding a man in bondage, and had slaves of my own when I was young.

But I am better off than before, not only not being considered part of the larder, but because these giants treat us with a certain rough kindness. We are fed twice a day on barley and whatever greens we are able to find in our cultivation, although we're forbidden meat.

I was told the only rules were to work hard and obey all orders, and I would be fed and, in time, if I was exceptionally obedient, allowed to mate with one of my fellows.

I looked at the women in the pens around me, grimaced, and determined to not work *that* hard. I'll know when I've been a captive too long when these drabs start looking good.

The giant was somber, and his unsheathed knees. He picked up his sword and ran his edge. "The Way says I must slay you, for

They've even seen me writing, which none of them can do, and are impressed, and have given me scraps of paper to continue this letter or journal on. I asked them if it could be taken to the outside, to somehow reach my wife so she will not grieve and think I've been killed by the barbarians of the desert. They growled, evidently liking the Adigrat no more than I do, but neither said it could or could not be accomplished.

However, I've been considering what happened when I was the captive of the Adigrat. By playing on their false honor, I was able to save my life. If the giants believe in The Way so strongly, perhaps a bit of change might do some good. For me, at any rate.

Perhaps, if I study my masters closely, I may be able to find another such device.

MATTERS NOW ARE PROGRESSING SATISFACTORILY, I think. I had two choices. If I thought there was the slightest possibility of escape, I should have blighted into the other slaves, becoming an ignored cipher. But there is no way I could successfully make my way through these mountains and reach safety. If the giants didn't recapture me, the beasts of the hills would have me for their own within hours.

The other possibility was to rise, like cream, to the top. So each night, in spite of the cold, I stripped and washed in water from the spring that ran, in stone troughs, through my pen, then washed my garments and hung them to dry. I fashioned a crude comb from a thorn-branch, and used that to keep my beard and hair combed.

My nattiness produced three offers from my fellow captives, two women and one man. I thanked them, but said I could not grant their wishes, as much as I wanted, being under a vow of chastity.

Since I was the newest slave, Lombok was already keeping an eye on me, and my ostentatious neatness made me even more obvious. I was picking up my hoe from the pile of implements when he called me to him.

As a good slave, I knelt and knuckled my forehead.

"That is good," he said. "I should have all my slaves show such respect. Where did you learn that?"

"That is the custom among slaves in my own country," I said.

"But you could not have been a slave. I can tell by the richness of your clothing and how quickly you have learned our tongue."

"I was not, but I held many myself."

The giant rumbled mirth.

"So now the wheel has turned full circle, eh? Now you are my slave. How do you like being owned by the great Lombok, chieftain of all he surveys?"

I shrugged. Lombok growled anger.

"You think there are mightier?"

"I did not say that, Lombok," I said carefully. "I just wonder why you do not do a better job of displaying your greatness."

"I do not understand."

"All your slaves do is labor in the fields. You, or your woman or your brother do all the other work."

"Of course. That is The Way. How else could it be?"

"Where I come from, there were field slaves and house slaves," I said.

"House slaves? What were their tasks?"

"Everything that a master did not wish to do, from emptying the night-soil pots to cooking to laundry to cleaning the house itself."

"Humph," Lombok said. "Then what was left for the masters?"

"The masters choose their own tasks, and they were freed to devote more time and thought to what they were most interested in."

The giant mused.

"So if I were to have a house slave, then I could spend more time in the mines?"

"There, or creating more cunning handles for the swords, or even thinking about what a new weapon might look like."

"No new weapons. The Way has said what is allowed."

"Then you could hunt more."

"Most of the tasks you told me of are women's. Do women have house slaves, too?"

"More than men."

Lombok thought on that. "If Jehoi had a slave," he said, thinking aloud, "she would be happier. Which means I would be happier. Look you...have you a name?"

"Amalric Antero."

"Two names, eh? I see why you think so well of yourself. The Way only gave us one. Why would someone want to be a house slave?"

"For many reasons, O chief," I said. "They are permitted to remain indoors when it is raining or cold. They do different tasks, so their minds aren't crippled doing one thing day after day after day. They are generally given better clothes than the field slaves, which also gives great honor to their masters. They eat his table leavings instead of what is given them in the pens."

"There are other rewards. Sometimes they are given days to themselves, or gifts of gold or silver. If they provide a great service, they are freed."

"Freed? That cannot be. There are slaves, there are giants. One serves the other. There can be no other Way. Following it exactly is our greatest honor. Anyone who thinks otherwise must be killed at once!"

I instantly discarded that idea.

"Excuse me, Lombok. But I must return to my work—all the other workers are far ahead of me, and I will have to give up my noon meal to keep even with them."

Giants may be slow in one way, but not in others.

"Are you a sorcerer, Amalric Antero?"

"I am not, O chief. I promise you that."

"Then forget your hoe," Lombok said. "You are now my first house slave. Go now to my wife and tell her of my decision. Do whatever work she requires."

That was the first step. My fellow slaves liked me little for having risen above them, but that only lasted for two days, until Jehoi decided I had too much work, and she needed another pair of hands. I named another slave, a woman named Cerigo, who seemed a bit brighter than the others. The other slaves noted I had the power to

better their lot, and so I became quite the favorite in the pen.

It didn't take long to discover another reason Lombok wanted new faces around—his household was a distinctly unhappy one.

Jehoi was afraid of Lombok, for reasons I wasn't able to discover at first. She was terribly attracted to his brother, but even though they were wed, Morea always slept alone.

*sword lay across his
finger down its
you are a sorcerer..."*

Cerigo knew some of the story, and found out the rest. Jehoi was Lombok's fourth wife. The other three had been set aside because they were unable to give him an heir. I asked if this was why Morea was also married to her. Cerigo said no, this was the custom. But Morea and his brother weren't especially fond of each other, and so Morea never slept with his brides, but instead occasionally accompanied with a widow from another clan.

Giants may be simple, I thought, but their love life certainly wasn't.

All I had to do was change Lombok's life, and I had an idea on how to do that—by getting Jehoi pregnant. Don't start, Omerye, I didn't plan to do it myself. I don't think it's even possible for giants and men to mate. I hope not, anyway. Since Morea's reluctance wasn't that he preferred men, it seemed it might be possible for me to spread a little romance among these great creatures.

To me, Jehoi was about as unattractive a being as could be imagined, standing about nine feet tall, with hair that straggled down to her waist, rough skin, and a noticeable mustache on her upper lip. I asked Cerigo if Jehoi was considered ugly by the others, and she shook her head. "She looks just like other giants," she said.

I began my plan by being very nice to the giantess, arranging flowers in her bedroom, being a willing ear any time she wanted to talk, taking extra care when I washed her dresses at the creek, and so forth. I remembered how to make a sweet I loved as a child, which was no more than bread dough sprinkled with sugar and then baked on a plate. The next time Jehoi baked, I found a flat plate, and borrowed some dough, rolled it out, cut it in strips, and sprinkled it with sugar and another spice I found in their larder that resembled cinnamon. I baked this until it just turned brown, and gave it to Jehoi.

I've seldom seen greater joy—she devoured it, squealing like a young girl. Of course her squeals shook my eardrums, but I tried to keep from wincing.

Little by little, I became Jehoi's trusted companion, and learned all her secrets, which of course I already knew most of, but now I found out the details. She was only afraid of Lombok because he had told her if she did not bear a child within a year, she, too, would be divorced and sent back to her people. Otherwise, she said she loved him and wanted to be with him always. She also felt shamed that Morea never came to her in the night.

I said I might be able to help, and she looked at me, her eyes wide, and said I would be like a wizard if I could.

The problem was that Lombok was incapable of siring a child, and Morea was unwilling to help. The solution seemed obvious.

I waited for three days, until Lombok announced he was going out on a trading expedition. I smiled sadly to myself, wishing this gods-damned Way did not exist, for I could have apprenticed myself to the giant, taught him much of city-merchants ways, improved his lot and reputation, and then asked for the favor of my freedom. But that was not honorable, was not The Way, and hence could not be.

I asked Cerigo if she could do some sort of special dinner for Morea and Jehoi, having little idea of what that might be. Cerigo said she could. I wished there was wine to be had, for such lubrication would aid my scheme immensely. But that, like freedom, was invisible.

Jehoi and I began our big day by taking a walk away from the caves, until we reached a hot springs one of the other slaves had told me about. I carried a pack with a towel, fresh clothing for the woman, and some other things. I bade Jehoi strip, enter the water and scrub herself with what I gave her.

She gaped at me. "Giants do not swim," she said.

"You are not swimming," I said. "You are bathing. This is something that is necessary, and you said you would do anything to be happy, did you not?" She looked worried, as if whoever had created The Way was about to strike her with a thunderbolt, but obeyed, rubbing hard with my gift.

It was nothing more than a bar of soap I'd made of lye, antelope fat, and the crushed oil of some sweet mountain flowers I'd picked. I was very grateful I'd watched our house servants make soap when I was a boy, and had traded in various soaps over the years so I was familiar with its manufacture.

I told Jehoi to scrub until she was pink, then to dry herself. I handed her a vial that contained another of my concoctions and told her to rub it well into her skin.

The giants used an odorless mineral oil that flowed from a spring deep in the mountains to keep their weapons from rusting, and I'd blended it with that cinnamon-smelling spice and the natural oil from finely crushed flower petals.

She put on a fresh dress I'd scrubbed until there was none of the normal giant-reek to it. I sniffed. Unsurprisingly, Jehoi smelled quite nice, which proved what I'd suspected—the terrible reek giants were known for was nothing more than massive filth. I said she smelled beautiful, then asked her if she liked the way she smelled.

"I don't know," Jehoi said. "It is too different. I smell like...like a meadow, in spring."

"Good. Now, sit down and let me work on your hair."

That was a task, and I went through three of my improvised brushes before I got the tangles out and her hair hung straight and even down her back. I trimmed the ends with a knife, and then we were through.

On the way back, I stopped and plucked an edelweiss from a cranny, and told her to put it in her hair.

When Morea returned from the fields, he looked most puzzled. He asked what was that strange smell, and Jehoi said, "Me." He frowned, sniffed again, then looked thoughtful.

Cerigo and I served the meal to them, then made ourselves scarce.

From outside, we heard the rumble of their voices, then, hopefully, laughter. Jehoi had an interesting giggle, if something that rattles doorways can be called a giggle.

Some of the lamps in the cave were blown out. I pressed my palms together for luck, and prayed. Then the lamp in the central chamber went out, and one was lit in Morea's own bedchamber. Then, it too was blown out, and there was silence for a time.

Then I heard moans, panting, and Morea shouted once aloud in passion. I prayed even harder for more shouts as Cerigo and I went to our pens.

When we returned for our duties after the sun rose, Morea called to us from his bedchamber that we would not be required for awhile, and to return to our pen. They wished to be alone. My prayer was answered.

So it went for two days.

On the third, I waited outside their cave until a dazedly happy Jehoi came out to use the jakes, and told her it was time to renew the spell. I should have cut my tongue out before I used that word.

But she appeared not to notice, and happily agreed. So, once more, we washed and perfumed, and Jehoi returned to her lover.

A day or so later, Lombok returned. He smelt suspiciously of his wife, and was about to say something critical, but he noticed her happy smile and, unlike most husbands, had sense enough to keep his mouth shut.

That night the night was loud with his passion. I wondered if I was able to win my freedom, if there might not be a tidy franchise selling soap and perfume to these giants, for there was always a market for finely worked iron and steel.

A week later, I was gathering deadwood for the cooking fire when Cerigo came running.

"Amalricanero," she cried. "You are a wise man."

"I know that," I said. "But in what regard did you notice it?"

"Jehoi is pregnant!"

"Now, how can that be told? Women don't know for several months after their flow stops."

"Giants are different, and Jehoi says she can tell. She knows."

I heard shouts of joy from the cave, and guessed Lombok and Morea had been told at the same time.

I had given a great boon to this giant, now I planned to ask a greater one in return.

Lombok summoned me from the pen early next morning. I was ready with my most honey-soaked words to convince him the gods, or whoever, wouldn't mind if The Way got a little bent for one single slave.

I expected to find him joyful. Instead, the giant was somber, and his unsheathed sword lay across his knees. I knew there was trouble.

"Amalricanero," he said, "I have never known a man who could gladden me and make me sad, let alone one such as yourself."

"I thank you for the first, but what could I have done to make you unhappy?"

"You promised me once you were no wizard."

"And I spoke the truth."

"Then why, when you helped my wife conceive on my return, did you tell her about casting your spell?"

Too late I remembered my jocularities, and swore at myself. I tried to tell the giant it was but a jest.

"No, no," he said. "I know you were speaking the truth then, for I have tried and tried to sire a child, and had given up on all women's ability to accept my mighty seed. And then you came along and Jehoi becomes pregnant. I am no fool, Amalricanero. And it grieves me much to think of what I must do."

He picked up his sword and ran his finger down its keen edge.

"The Way says I must slay you, for you are a sorcerer. But you have done me the greatest favor, and ensured the name of Lombok shall be carried through the generations. I have always paid my debts fairly. I am an honorable man, yet I see no honorable solution." I was thinking as fast as I could, trying to think of one, but Lombok continued. "No honorable way but one. Come with me, Amalricanero."

He motioned me out the door, and toward a path that wound up toward the highest mountain peak. I asked him what he intended, but he told me to keep silent. As we climbed higher and higher I turned back and saw, looking up at me, Jehoi and Cerigo. I waved farewell to them, in the hopes my sentimentality might dissuade the giant from whatever bloody fate he planned.

The path ended on a plateau, not far below the summit.

"This is your weird, Amalricanero. I remember how you were left at one of our trading spots, in the manner we acquire all our slaves, and thought of this ancient site. This spot is where we punish witches and others who practice the evils of magic. Those who live in the skies know of it, and will come to you."

"I bid you remain here. I am returning down the mountain. I shall wait, in concealment, not far from this place for two days. If you come down the path in that time, I will slay you. After two days, I shall return to my home. If you have survived until then, you are free to find your way to your homeland. I am sentencing you to death, Amalricanero, for no one unfamiliar with these mountains can survive in them. But you should not worry about that, for you shall never come down the path. You shall be taken, instead." He looked worriedly up at the skies.

"By what?"

"I am sorry, Amalricanero," the giant said, not answering. "You were a good slave, and before Jehoi told me of your deceit and your

I heard the rustling they were giant bats, sheathed at their belts,

true craft, which I should have guessed long before, I was attempting to think of something I could do to change the rule of The Way and grant you freedom.

"Farewell, Amalricanero. Know that your story shall be told to my son when he is born, and your memory remain fresh. I hope your death is an easy one." Lombok was starting down the path.

"Wait," I said. I took these pages from my pouch. "If I am to die, and you wish to grant me the slightest of boons, give me leave to finish this letter to my wife, and promise you shall take it out of the mountains and see it sent to her."

Lombok looked once more at the heavens, and was quite openly terrified.

"You cannot deny me this, O chief," I said forcefully. "As your slave, I demand this last favor!"

Lombok told me to write hastily. I did.

I know not what doom he has intended me for, but I have survived two desperate times thus far, and have confidence I shall find a way to live through the third.

O, Omerye, I hope this long separation soon ends, and I come to safety and I am able to return home to you.

Pray to Te-Date and have faith in your loving,

Amalric

J EYPU,

My most darling Omerye,

As you can see, I am safe, although I'm sure you've already received the brief note I sent by fast messenger when I first returned to civilization.

Not only am I safe, but I've returned with about half a ton of gold in various forms, and am fairly sure I've discovered two new trading areas, although the manner in which I accomplished my task was hardly convenient.

I have but an hour to get this letter finished, and on the dispatch boat for Orissa. My factor attempted to bribe its captain to allow me aboard, but he, unfortunately, is an all-too-honest man. So I shall be traveling in the wake of the courier ship on whatever fast and reliable ship my factor can procure in the next day or so.

You may find what happened a bit amusing, since I began this journey as a master trader, then became provender, a slave, next a wizard, and finished as a king.

I shall begin where I stopped, standing on that mountain plateau, feeling dusk crawl toward me, with a chill moving up my spine that had nothing to do with the weather.

I heard the rustling of wings, and looked up. It was hard to see, in the gathering gloom, but then I saw them, swooping toward me.

At first I thought they were giant bats, but then I saw their dark-mottled naked bodies, arms, legs, curved daggers sheathed at their belts, and knew I was being taken by demons!

They landed all around, and drew their knives, gabbling something, which I didn't understand. One came at me, his weapon ready. I thought he was going to stab me, and so ducked under his knife, grabbed his wrist, and twisted. His bone cracked like dry tinder, and I kicked him hard in the ribs, hearing his bones shatter.

He screeched and went down, great leathery wings flopping on the plateau, and his mates floundered around him toward me. But I had his dagger, and my back to the wall.

One of them rushed me, on my offside, and I grabbed his arm,

of wings and looked up. At first I thought but then I saw their curved daggers and knew I was being taken by demons!

and yanked him into my waiting blade. It was like I was hurling a child about, and then I realized that if these beings flew, and flew without magic, they could have no more bulk than a bird, or else their wings could not support them.

I stabbed the second in the chest, but he had his dying hands on the haft of the blade, and wrenched it from my grip as he fell, and then they swarmed over me.

They made no attempt to kill me, but pulled things from waist-pouches and bound me securely. Then one of them, perhaps their leader, shook a net from his pouch, and I was lashed into the middle of it.

Eight of them took firm hold, carried me to the edge of the plateau and, at a signal, dove off. I hope I did not scream, and bore myself proudly, but doubt it.

The ground rushed up, and their wings bent trying to lift my weight. An updraft of air sent us shooting upward, and other winged demons helped, and we climbed to a great height, far above the mountains, and flew on, deep into the north. My captors chattered among themselves like great bats, and I had not the heart to cast the Spell of Tongues.

I felt nothing but sickness and fear, then a certain fascination came, and I realized I was the first Orissan to experience flight, unless some of our Evocators have secretly been able to perfect the art.

We flew on for hours and hours. Below us was nothing but the darkness of the prairie, with never a sign of friendly firelight or the gleam of lanterns from a peasant's hovel. A few times we flew over dark blots I guessed to be ruined cities, and then we reached a great river, and flew along its course.

We were far beyond any explorations I'd read of, or even legends from other people we Orissans have met in our travels.

A monstrous rock rose beside the river, and we swooped toward it. I thought these demons would have their nests atop it, then saw our destination clear: An enormous, half-ruined castle loomed, a castle with turrets, balconies, balustrades carved from the living rock. A moment later, we landed on one balcony, and it was thus I came to the castle known as Uga, and was greeted as a great sorcerer. It was either that, or face instant death.

BY THE NEXT MORNING I'D RECOVERED SOME OF MY WITS, and it was an odd thing that did it. I was dragged from my room by a pair of my guards, which, even though it was high-ceilinged, clean and comfortable, still had the bars and bolted door that made it a cell. I'd had time to work the Spell of Tongues, and now could understand the high-pitched squeaking of my captors. What brought my courage back was seeing a furred-wing demon whose red-striped belt evidently meant he held authority, blustering at a smaller, perhaps younger creature, for all the world like an Orissan sergeant tearing into a recruit. I somehow don't think demons need to harangue each other, for that is a delight reserved for earthly creatures.

Regardless of that, these beings—horrible though they are—are very much of this earth. They call themselves the Y'agha and consider themselves a higher form of life than any unwinged two-legged person.

But their king is, or rather was, as human as I am. At least by birth. My guards dragged me to the throne room, which seemed strange, being a huge three-sided, high-ceilinged room that opened

directly to the skies. But a moment's thought showed it very logical for winged beings.

Seated on the throne was their king, an immensely fat, fairly old man named Uzau Carn, a name he said every king of the Y'agha held since the first Carn took the throne.

I know kings are permitted to exaggerate, claiming descent from the gods or from the First Man or Woman or whatever. But Carn was by far the worst of any I've heard tales of. He said his long-ago forebear came from another world, a world where machines ran of themselves and could fly, and men built vast cities of stone, mortar and steel, far higher than the long-gone towers of Lycanth. This I might have been able to accept, but he also said they had weapons that spat steel, without anyone casting a spell, sometimes one at a time, sometimes many such pellets. I pretended awe, of course—awe and absolute belief. Someone who names a king a liar is generally not considered among the wisest of mortals.

Carn said that the first of the Carns had originally been the enemy of the Y'agha, and had caused the great disaster that left the castle partially ruined. But for some reason, and Carn seemed deliberately vague about this, he'd come back to this castle in his old age, saying men disgusted him and he wished to rule over the Y'agha.

They accepted him, and brought him slaves from other lands to breed with, and so for many centuries the Y'agha had been content with their king.

But with this last Uzau, trouble had risen. He had been unable to produce an heir, no matter how he tried. He told me it was a curse laid upon all women brought to his bed, so all of them were barren.

As I said, the man was a complete mountebank, even to himself. Now his honor and the honor of the kingdom were at stake. I winced inwardly, hearing that word "honor" again.

He knew it was too late for him to father a prince, and so the only chance of gaining the immortality of legend was to find a new king. He'd consulted seers, and they said that he must capture the man himself, in battle, and he would be a man of the south.

I listened politely, and when Carn was finished I inquired what this had to do with me, and why I'd been so rudely kidnapped.

"Because you are a wizard, and can fulfill the other condition the seers have laid upon me. They say one thing must happen before a new man can sit on the throne.

"And that is...I must fly like my people."

I'm afraid I goggled at the words as they came out of this hulk's mouth, and the thought crossed my mind that he would fly not long after pigs developed the talent.

"So, wizard, when my Y'agha came to me and said they'd taken a captive from the Altar of Mages, where the giants sacrifice those who practice magic, a land where we have had but poor fishing of late, I was delighted.

"Now, looking at you, even though your costume is threadbare, I feel a flickering of hope, for surely you are dressed more finely than any man I've captured in years, almost as if you were a nobleman. Were you such?"

I admitted to my position.

"A noble sorcerer, eh? Then perhaps you shall live."

I might have been about to correct him as to my abilities, but that last made me hesitate.

"Live, sire?"

"Yes. Come here." He led me to the edge of the chamber. "If you

succeed in your spells, then I shall give you half the gold in my treasure chambers, and you shall have great power as my court sorcerer. If you fail..." and he pointed out. I looked and gulped. A stone wall fell vertically for more than 500 feet to the edge of the river where a tiny village sat. "If you fail," Carn went on, "I shall personally hurl you from this height, just as I have cast half a hundred other charlatans. Now, can you make me fly?"

After a threat like that, I could have made an elephant soar.

I decided at that moment that if I must die, I would not go to the Dark Seeker alone.

I said I thought flying might be a possibility, but it would take some time. He said I could have all the materials and assistance I wished, but I must accomplish my task before the waning of the next moon, about a month away, and called for my guards.

My new apartments were at the top of this castle, looking out at the grassy wastelands around. I had several rooms, all luxuriously furnished. I was given an aide, a Y'agha prince named Tograh.

I tried to avoid panic, and put the problem of making a hog into a wolf out of my mind, and asked Tograh about his people.

I learned they had the king they deserved, for they practice some

indeed, they were. I summoned Tograh and found I was able to lift him with but one arm around his waist—he weighed no more than sixty pounds. I wondered if his bones were hollow, like birds, but did not ask. Then I considered the flying beings of legend, and how their wings were generally described as smaller than they. The Y'agha's organs of flight were huge, each one stretching more than fifteen feet, and even furled were inconvenient to maneuver through the castle's corridors. Therefore, I reasoned, wings for a man would need to be even larger. I felt Tograh's, and found they are of a thin membrane, with occasional strips like cartilage. I wager they weigh no more than two or three pounds at the most.

I also noted that the Y'agha soar in flight, like a gull or eagle, not flapping busily like ducks or swallows, but gliding, using every bit of the wind they can to stay airborne.

Next, I considered the ratio between the area of these wings and a Y'agha's weight. Then I sought out King Carn, and asked him his people. He glowered and flushed, ashamed of his size like many fat people, but told me. It was even more than I thought, but slowly, laboriously, my brain was producing a plan.

I told him I was coming closer to being able to cast my spell, but

At that instant, I heard the clear sound and one of the wings above him folded, and spinning, then plummeted downward.

of the most horrible vices known. The village at the bottom of the cliff was inhabited by beings who once had been men, but now were little more than two-legged beasts. These the Y'agha used for food. But where the Adigrat were cannibals by religion, the Y'agha ate humans as a regular part of their diet. They have all of the sexual vices known to the worst bordello, and love to see bloodshed and torture. It is a mark of status among them as to who can keep a screaming, tormented ruin that was a man alive the longest. They have other unspeakable practices I would rather not mention, except one—at birth they cut away the wings of their women when they are babes, so they will have less power than the men. Needless to say, this does not make the females any more merciful or kindly than their mates.

Altogether, a charming people.

My increased loathing wasn't accomplishing much, so I turned my mind to what I could do to escape. As a mask, I ordered Tograh to fill my apartments with all kinds of things that pertained to flight, from caged birds to feathers to the seeds of plants that propagate on the wind.

For awhile I even thought of devising some kind of spell that might work, but gave it up. If Janos Greycloak had never mentioned the possibility of such magic, nor had the mages of the Far Kingdoms shown any such skills, what chance would I have?

Escape was equally futile. There was no way I could manage to break out of my cell, find my way through Carn's palace in the hopes of locating stairs or something that would take me down to the flatlands, even if such existed, which Tograh said it did.

I had but two choices—either Uzau Carn would fly...or I would, and my flight would be most brief.

I sat by the hour, watching the Y'agha as they swooped through the skies around the castle and, as long as I did not think about what monsters flew under those graceful bat-wings, could admire their elegance.

Then an idea came as I watched the Y'agha pirouette, and I remembered how fragile they were when I fought them. Light,

that it would be necessary for him to assist. He swore to me he would do anything.

I said he must lose weight, a great deal of weight. He objected loudly, but I reminded him of his oath, and he grudgingly agreed. I thought even if I was to fail, I'd at least have the slight pleasure, as I plunged to my death, that I'd made his last days as miserable as possible.

Next I ordered great quantities of the lightest silk possible, and the castle's most skilled seamstresses. I'd expected them to be slaves, from the many peoples the Y'agha raided against, but was surprised to find them all Y'agha women—Tograh's most pregnant wife among them. I found the reason for this at once—everyone knew of my task, and considered it an honor to assist in giving their king his desires, even if I was to fail.

I told Tograh I wanted his men to find the strongest, lightest wood they could, and to have their slaves cut it into the thinnest, longest strips possible. Then I sent for one slave, and had him bring me samples of the glues the workers used. I selected one that might work and, once the wood was cut into strips, had my team glue several together, which would give far greater strength than a single piece.

By now I'd more than filled my apartments, and so the two Y'agha noblemen were grumblingly forced to vacate their rooms on either side. But I needed still more room, and so was given one of the king's disused audience chambers to work.

I drew out my plans in chalk on the stone floor, covering a surprisingly great expanse, then wood strips were laid on the lines I'd made, with a touch of glue to hold them in place while the work was being done. Over these strips was stretched silk, which was sewn tightly around the strips.

I used stronger wood to make two U-shaped brackets, and had strong leather straps fastened between them.

Then my silk membranes were fastened to these brackets, one in front, one behind. I studied my contraption, and thought it good. Then I remembered almost all birds have tails, and added yet another spread of strips—and silk, which I attached to the network

with heavier wooden battens.

It was complete, and while I doubted it would work in the manner planned, though it might work in an entirely different way and lead to my freedom.

I got a dozen Y'agha to help me cut my invention loose from where it'd been glued to the floor, and lifted it. It held together, even when I positioned myself in the middle and shook it vigorously. I felt a moment of absurd hope.

King Carn had been impatient to see my work, but I'd refused to show it to him, remembering what my tailor had said once, that a man ignorant of cloth sneers at the pieces, but marvels once the tunic is sewn together.

So it was with the king, when I finally announced my task was complete. We maneuvered my apparatus through the corridors to the throne room. I sweated heavily, having forgotten about transporting the device, and was fearful I'd done the stupidest thing a craftsman can do: building a boat in his yard so large he has no way of transporting it to the river. But it made it, if barely.

King Carn surveyed the mass of gaily colored silk and wood with disappointment.

*of wood snapping,
he pinwheeled,*

inwardly. A little drunkenness would not be amiss.

At last, false dawn came, and I said we were ready.

I bade the king come to me, and had the greatest Y'agha nobles strap him into my apparatus and help him walk toward the edge of the precipice.

"O King, I have used my greatest magic."

"I can tell," he said. "I can feel it within me."

I had a smile of satisfaction—no one is easier to fool than the mummer himself.

"Now, King, when I give the signal, when the sun's rays first strike the castle, I wish you to cast yourself out, and take wing. Do you hear me, King Uzau Carn?"

"I hear."

"Are you afraid? A man who is afraid cannot fly."

"I have no fear," he bellowed. "I have never known fear."

The sky grew lighter and lighter and then, as yellow touched the land, I shouted, "Now, King Carn! Fly now!"

Carn shouted and leaped straight out, into 500 feet of nothingness. An instant later, the bastard actually flew!

Such was not my intent.

I'd decided I was doomed, and decided to take the creature of my misfortune with me. After he fell to his death, I would either fling myself after him, or die fighting the Y'agha, in either case an easier doom than would otherwise have been given me.

I had built this elaborate apparatus of silk and wood to closely resemble a bird with two sets of wings and a tail. I'd done my figuring honestly enough, so it might have flown, though I knew it was impossible for a man to actually fly. Perhaps this was my merchant's "honor," believing a customer should always be given his value.

Notice, I used the word *was*.

I don't know what happened, if my invention was capable of bearing the weight of a man, or if somehow, in the nonsense words I'd muttered, I'd come upon an actual incantation that called forth a demon or god's help.

Carn dropped away, then an updraft rising along the castle wall caught and lifted him as if a rope had snatched him up, and he rose into the sky.

His people shouted triumph around me, and launched themselves after their master.

King Carn bent sideways, and turned, coming back toward the castle, then swooped away. I heard him howling in glee, and he turned once more, this time more steeply, one set of wings pointed down at the ground. This was his moment of triumph.

Then it was as if the magic had left him, for suddenly he slipped sideways, falling, and he screamed, and flailed at the air, trying to force it to hold him.

At that instant, I heard the clear sound of wood snapping, and one of the wings above him folded, and he pinwheeled, spinning, then plummeted downward. Two or three of the Y'agha dove after him, but he was falling too fast for them.

His body became a black dot against the river below, and I saw a small splash of white as he struck.

Other Y'agha tried to rescue him, or at least recover the corpse, but without luck. The current was too swift, and he was too heavy, and so the last human king of the Y'agha died below his evil castle of Ūga.

Of course, once they recovered a bit, the Y'agha wanted to kill me. But I was ready—inspiration had suddenly come.

"How dare you," I shouted, in my most regal voice. "You should be on your knees to me, your new king, not threatening my life."

That brought a gabble of shock.

"Listen to me. Did not the prophecy say your new king would come after King Carn flew?"

Mutters of assent.

"Did the prophecy not say he would come from the south? I come from the south. And was I not captured by King Uzau Carn, with you his instruments?"

"But you killed our king," Tograh protested.

"So? Did I not warn him not to be afraid? And didn't you all hear

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"I thought you were a wizard," he announced.

"And so I am," I said.

"Then what is this? If I had wished an artisan, I would have sent my men out to steal one."

"Be careful, O King," I said in my most portentous voice. "Do you slander the magician for his brazier, wand, or symbols? You have asked for a most mighty piece of magic, such as the world has never seen, and I am providing it. Do not doubt me or my contrivance, O King, lest you raise the wrath of the gods and they refuse the one hope they've extended to you."

Carn blanched a little, and nodded.

"I did not mean to insult your honor, O Amalric the Wizard."

"I forgive you," I said. "Besides, there is yet to be sorcery done on my work, so you can fly forth at dawn and fulfill your proper destiny as your honor requires."

I told the king I wished his entire court to see the spell cast, and I would begin at dusk.

As the sun's rays died, I set braziers burning around my device, having found a powder in one of the kitchens that gave forth red smoke. I drew symbols on the stone: rough drawings of various kinds of birds I remembered.

In a center brazier I burnt spices I thought might actually have some efficacy, such as anise, dandelion, eucalyptus, blue vervain, lobelia, and others. I also burnt the ground-up bones of birds I'd had taken by the Y'agha. Over and over, I chanted a spell I'd devised:

Lords of air

Hear this plea, grant the wish

The king must rule, his people must live

The wish is humble, it harms not

It reaches for the sky, it soars like the birds

It takes of the wind, it touches the clouds

I intermingled this with various nonsense syllables I'd invented that sounded like the names of gods or demons.

I chanted as the hours crept past. I noted King Carns was surreptitiously sipping from a flagon of either wine or brandy, and smiled



MAGIC CARPETS

BY LESLIE WHAT
Illustration by Paul Salmon

THE SANTA ANA WINDS ARRIVED, whipped into a frenzy by a spirit with the power to fold hot air inside wind. I lay in the backyard beside my big sister, Pammy, feeling the dry breeze tickle the backs of my legs. My skin itched where the crop-top I was wearing had exposed a four-inch band of belly to dead grass. I sat up to scratch and

Pammy sat up, too. She tugged her crop-top down, as if to cover the welts Daddy had raised that morning, then reached to pull the sports page from beneath her transistor radio.

"What time is the game?" I asked. We hadn't had a radio or a team back home, but in Los Angeles we had both.

Pammy checked her watch. "Now," she said.

A wind blew, thick and breathy like a child learning to whistle. I watched a leaf fall from one of our two avocado trees and circle in the

air, stirred by the wind's hand. Pammy let go of the paper and it skimmed twenty feet along the grass before landing on the chain-link cyclone fence that divided the back of our property from the neighbor's.

"I better get it," Pammy said, "before it flies into the witch's yard." Daddy had warned us just that morning to stay away from Mrs. Garcia, "...that witch next door. Stay away from her and her devil magic," he'd said. Pammy thought it all funny, but I couldn't help looking past the fence to Mrs.

Garcia's back door. She'd been nice to us all summer, awfully nice for someone who wasn't even a blood relative. I didn't want to trust her. Maybe Daddy was right. Maybe Mrs. Garcia was a witch.

Pammy stood and slipped her tanned feet into her rubber thongs. She smoothed the wrinkles from her shorts and walked to the fence to pull away the newspaper. She crumpled the paper into a ball, which she threw at me. I straightened my arms to bat it away, but the wind changed, and the paper floated away.

Pammy pointed to the leaves and paper scraps littering the lawn. "Daddy will be happy the wind is keeping us busy," she said. "Won't be able to do nothing today except clean up this mess."

I was twelve and didn't mind the yard. But Pammy was almost seventeen and for her, things were different. "If it wasn't for this radio," she said, "I'd go crazy."

"It wouldn't hurt to rake the yard while we listen to the game," I said, wanting to get it over with.

Pammy winced as she rubbed a yellowing bruise above her elbow. "We might as well wait till the winds stop," she said. She stuck out her tongue at her peeling stucco house. "Sometimes I wish Daddy was dead."

"You don't really mean that," I said. Daddy wouldn't be home for another hour, but I worried Pammy's wish might be carried on the wind to the slaughterhouse where he worked. Daddy had learned the butcher's trade during the Korean War, but now he hated his job, said the work was fit for idiots.

"Maybe I don't," Pammy said, "but I do wish things were different." She slumped to the ground and positioned her legs out in front to catch the sun. "Well, I'm turning on the radio before we miss any more."

We listened to Vince Gully's voice. "There's talk Maury Wills may break Ty Cobb's record of ninety-six stolen bases," he said. Hearing Maury's name made me smile. Pammy noticed this and grinned, her lipstick forming pink lines along the creases of her lips.

I strained to hear above the static. "Turn it up," I said; she took her sweet time to do that. A boy had given the transistor radio to Pammy, but she'd told Daddy that she'd won it at school.

Mama called out from the house. "You girls in the yard?" She opened the screen door and stepped onto the patio. She sipped her whiskey from one of two crystal wedding glasses that had survived our move to California. "I'm going to take my nap," Mama said, "unless you need something." Her matted hair was the color of unbaked red clay and her brown polka-dot dress was wrinkled and discolored under her arms.

"We're OK," Pammy said. "Go on to sleep."

Mama yawned. "Look at this yard," she said in a lazy drawl. "It's those avocado trees, stealing life itself right from the ground, bearing the devil's fruit. No wonder I can't start my garden."

"You won't need no garden when those avocados ripen," I said. "We'll be eating them for the rest of the year." I didn't tell Mama I'd already tried the green fruit, even though it was still sour and hard and had given me a bad stomachache.

"You girls clean up before your Daddy gets home," Mama said. "And stay in the yard."

"We always do," said Pammy, and Mama went inside.

"Koufax comes out of his windup...and the throw...is...strike three...and the Giants are down after scoring one run," cried Vince Gully. "We'll come back with the top of the order, starting with Number Thirty, Maury Wills, leading off for the Los Angeles Dodgers." He made me listen by stringing out his words and letting his excitement show at the end of every sentence. He sounded thrilled even when I knew he was disappointed, even when the Dodgers were losing.

"Vince Gully really loves baseball," I said.

"It's Vin," Pammy said, shaking her head. "Vin Scully."

"Vin?" I asked, feeling my jaw drop. "Vin?"

Pammy smirked. "You probably agree Wills is gonna break Ty Cobb's record," she said.

"You bet," I said. "That Maury Wills is the fastest man in baseball."

"Mrs. Garcia says he's a Negro," Pammy said.

"I don't believe it," I said. I looked down, not wanting to meet her glance. "Not that it makes any difference."

"It's those
avocado
trees, steal-
ing life
itself right
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ground,
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devil's fruit.
No wonder
I can't
start my
garden."

"It'd make some difference if Daddy was to see your diary," Pammy said. She pulled up a handful of brown grass, held her palm upward, and spread her fingers to let the grass fall through. "Maury Wills," she said in a false high voice that mimicked mine. "Running. Stretching out his hand to touch...the base beyond reach. What's that, a haiku?"

"Pammy! You said you'd stay out of my diary," I said. I plucked some grass to throw toward her, but the wind blew the grass back toward me. "Maury Wills is a great athlete," I said. "How would Mrs. Garcia know if he was a Negro, anyway?"

"Maybe she's got a television," Pammy said, and I felt stupid because I hadn't even thought about that.

In a little while Mrs. Garcia came into her yard—just as she did every afternoon—to water her rose garden. "Hello, girls," she called.

Pammy waved. "Our fairy godmother, at last," she whispered.

I looked through the chain-link fence into her yard, alive with color. Mrs. Garcia wore an orange flowered sundress. Her black hair was swept into a knot sprayed stiff enough to keep it from coming undone in the wind. She always looked magazine-model perfect, like someone make-believe. "How's your mother feeling today?" she asked.

I wanted to say, "She's fine," but Pammy said, "She's gone back to sleep," before I could get my words out. Sometimes I wondered at Pammy, telling all our troubles to a stranger.

"It's not right," said Mrs. Garcia, fingering a crystal necklace that made the sunlight dance along her skin. "You girls need to get out of that yard." She bent to smell her roses. "How are my Beauties?" she said. "How's Mr. Lincoln? and Silver Jubilee? Irish Good? First Prize? and Honor?"

"Ground ball through the hole and into center and Wills is on with a base hit," said Vince.

Mrs. Garcia started the faucet and held her thumb in front of her nose. A whisper of spray flew over the back fence and landed on my arms. I watched her fret over her flowers like they were something precious, not just backyard shrubs. "They get thirsty in this wind," she said. "So, who's winning?"

The winds shifted direction and suddenly I caught the sweet scent of roses. The fragrance cut straight through the heat to make my nostrils tingle. It was early on in the game so I said, "The Dodgers are behind, but they'll make it up."

"I'm sure they will," said Mrs. Garcia. "Would you girls like a soda?" I looked at Pammy, suddenly afraid. "Thank you very much," Pammy said. "We're very thirsty."

Mrs. Garcia smiled. She set the hose down on the grass and hurried into her house. She came out with two opened Coke bottles and made her way to the fence. She stood on her tiptoes and handed the sodas over to Pammy.

Pammy started sipping hers right away, but I held onto mine, afraid to drink.

"There he goes...and the throw...is...in time...and Wills is caught at second," screamed Vince.

I could not stop the sigh that made me sound so young.

"I'm sorry," said Mrs. Garcia.

"It's OK," I said. "They'll make it up." For the first time all day I felt as if I might break down, and I said without thinking, "Maybe

you could stop by for iced tea, sometime." I was sorry the moment I had spoken.

"That would be nice," said Mrs. Garcia.

Pammy strained to hit me with her elbow and her crop-top split along the side seam. She stuck two fingers in the hole and frowned. "Well, isn't this just great," she said.

"...a high fly to center and Davis is going back. Back, back, back, to the wall...and it's gone. One run in and here comes Mays. And the Giants lead it three to one," said Vince.

Mrs. Garcia stopped watering to listen. "Don't worry, girls. They'll make it up."

"Too bad Wills got caught at second," Pammy said.

I stared at my feet, tan except where the straps had carved out a pale upside-down 'V'. "Too bad," I said, but something inside me felt wrong. It was a terrible omen when the fastest man in baseball was thrown out.

THE WINDS BLEW HARD THAT NIGHT. MY bedroom faced the backyard and I was awakened by the noise of something walking on the roof. I crept from my room through the hallway to the door. I stepped out to the patio and into a warm breeze that pressed a dry kiss against my skin. The moon was low, streamers of light peeked through the tree branches. One avocado fell onto the roof, followed by another.

The wind blew around me, above me, over my ears, and down my neck, and in and out of the spaces between my toes. I felt a warmth under my feet and knew it was truly the very breath of the devil. Leaves hovered in the sky like hummingbirds. I heard an echo in the canyon and imagined that the canyon was Chavez Ravine, the Dodgers' new stadium.

I leaned forward and felt the wind hold me in an unnatural tilt. I could fly, I thought, with the Santa Ana winds lifting me into the air. I ran to the chain-link fence and back to the patio, then tried running from one side of the yard to the other, but I couldn't gather enough speed to take off.

I knew now that I was in the presence of magic, and I did not want that magic to end. "Never," I said aloud, as I plucked an eyelash and let it fly away into the night because Mama used to say that wishing on eyelashes made things come true.

In a while I went back to my room. I pulled my diary from its new place under the mattress and started another in a series of imaginary correspondences. "Dear Maury," I wrote, and when that didn't sound right, I changed it to "Dear Maurice." I chewed the end of my pencil and thought. "I will show you how to fly," I wrote, "and maybe you could teach me how to run."

After breakfast, Pammy and I dressed and put on our thongs to go out into the yard. The air smelled of eucalyptus, a medicinal scent, only faintly distasteful. We saw hundreds, maybe even thousands, of avocados on the ground, with shiny skins, bumpy and green. Our yard had never looked so alive. I pretended money had fallen from heaven as I skipped through the yard, kicking avocados out of my way. "Fastball," I said, and threw one at Pammy, barely missing her. She grabbed an avocado and beamed me on my head.

That made me cry, which brought Daddy out. He hadn't finished eating and his yellow paper napkin was tucked inside his collar. He glared at Pammy with his concrete-gray eyes. A wad of toilet

I leaned forward and felt the wind hold me in an unnatural tilt. I could fly, I thought, with the Santa Ana winds lifting me ...

tissue covered a red spot on his chin.

"What do you think you're doing?" he said. "I've got to get to work. I can't be bothered with you." He looked at the yard. "What's happened here?" he said.

"It's the wind, Daddy," Pammy said, using the haughty tone she'd recently adopted.

"You making fun of me, girl?" he asked. "You think I don't know that?" He narrowed his eyes. "What's that on your face?" he said. Pammy reached up to wipe away her lipstick. "I know you been using my razor," he said. "Who you showing off for, Pammy? You think I don't know what goes on here when I'm gone to work?"

"All the girls my age shave," Pammy said. "Wear makeup, too."

"You hear that?" Daddy said to no one. "What a place Los Angeles turned out to be." He threw his napkin to the ground and stormed over close enough to grab Pammy's hair. He shook her head back and forth.

Daddy swatted her belly, then switched to the small of her back. Pammy cried out as he smacked her cheek. He raised his hand again. If Mama was there, she would have told him, "Not in the face." That was what Mama always said since reading about the child whose face was paralyzed by a slap to the head. But Mama wasn't there: she was inside, still asleep.

Pammy cried out, "I can't see. Stop it, Daddy!"

Daddy held her chin in one hand and lifted his other hand to hit her.

I yelled, "Not in the face! Not in the face!" "You shut up," he said. "This is none of your concern."

"I can't see, Daddy!" Pammy said. She was bawling.

I felt scared. I was the one who had wished for the winds to continue and now our yard was ankle-deep in debris and Pammy was getting a beating. I should have been more careful after Maury Wills was caught at second.

"Stop," I said. "Please, Daddy. Not in the face."

Daddy stopped and stared at me. "You telling me what to do?" he asked.

"No, Daddy," I said. I hoped it wasn't too late to save Pammy. "Hit me instead," I said,

thankful when he walked my way, because I thought I could take anything.

At that moment I understood what it meant to see things crystal clear. The winds trickled to a breeze while the fury in Daddy grew. The air was clean and I saw the world as it was, with all the haze stripped away. Daddy raised his hand to strike my backside and I knew all at once that he wasn't even mad at me. Daddy didn't care who he was hitting. Just knowing that made me feel strong, because I loved him and I wanted him to love me. I let my body take the beating while my thoughts floated up with the leaves, tiny magic carpets on the wind.

After a while Daddy stopped and rubbed his hands together. He said, "You girls stay in the yard, now. I don't want any boys coming to the house."

"Yes, Daddy," I said in a whisper. I didn't know why Daddy was so afraid of boys. Pammy knew, but she wouldn't tell me.

"And clean up this mess," Daddy said. He left us to go to the job he hated.

Pammy held her hand against her face. She blinked hard. "I'm OK," she said. It was already hot outside, but she was shivering. "Why did you do that for me? Why'd you take my punishment?"

"I couldn't watch," I said. "Anyway, it really don't hurt that bad, so long as you don't keep your mind on it."

Then we heard Mrs. Garcia call, "Good morning," from her yard. There was an urgent questioning in her voice and I froze, not knowing how long she'd been there. Pammy bowed her head.

"Everything OK?" asked Mrs. Garcia. She fingered her crystal necklace.

"Just fine," Pammy answered, but there was a hard edge to her voice.

"You're sure?" Mrs. Garcia said. She stood just on the other side of the fence and slipped her fingers through the wire. "You'll tell me if there's anything I can do."

"We're fine," said Pammy, her voice breaking.

Mrs. Garcia narrowed her eyes and I knew she didn't believe that we were fine. After a while she said, "Look at all those avocados. What a waste." She shook her head. "What a waste," she said again, but she was looking at Pammy and not the avocados. "Must be fifty dollars worth, at least. Maybe it's time you girls got out of that yard. At the same time, you might as well try to make some money."

Pammy made her way toward the fence. "Will you help us?" she asked, and Mrs. Garcia agreed.

"Don't worry anymore," she said. "I'll do whatever you need. Let me bring some orange crates for the avocados."

"I don't think we should do this," I said. "We're not supposed to leave the backyard."

Pammy gave a sideways glance to me. She rubbed her cheek and I saw how the redness had given her a look of defiance. "Daddy will never know," Pammy said, "unless you tell him."

Mrs. Garcia set up a card table and two folding chairs on the sidewalk. Pammy and I each filled a crate full of avocados. We carried the crates to the table and sat facing the street. Mrs. Garcia left us, saying she'd tack up a sign announcing our sale on the street corner.

"We shouldn't be doing this," I said. I had to go to the bathroom but didn't want to leave my sister alone.

"Go on and tell Mama, if you're so worried."

"I'm not worried," I said, looking back at the house.

After a few minutes a battered green station wagon pulled up and a young Mexican boy with chocolaty skin and shiny black hair stepped from the car. His car keys jingled from his pinkie. He walked close to Pammy's side of the table.

"Good morning, young ladies," he said. His shirt was open to the second button; a few curly hairs poked through. He tipped his blue baseball hat as he nodded his head.

Pammy smiled. "Good morning," she said. "Are you interested in any avocados?"

He knelt beside the table and set his elbow down, near Pammy's tanned arm. "How much you want?" he asked.

"Twenty for one dollar," Pammy answered without lowering her gaze.

The water glass tipped and rolled to the edge of the table. I reached out, but I couldn't grab it in time, and the glass fell to the ground.

The boy pursed his brown lips and pushed out his breath. "You drive a hard bargain," he said, "but I'll pay you five dollars for the two boxes."

"What will you do with them all?" Pammy asked.

"My father's restaurant," he said. "They'll ripen and we'll freeze what we don't use right away." He handed the five-dollar bill to Pammy. I saw her red cheeks blush even darker as he folded his hand over hers.

He walked over to open the back of his station wagon. "Help me empty them into my car," he said to Pammy.

A hot wind blew against my chest. I tried to say, "No," but the wind had sucked away my breath.

Pammy put her arms around one crate to pick it up. The boy walked close and pressed his hip against hers. They carried one crate to the station wagon, balanced it on the edge of the car door until the boy tipped the crate on its end and let the fruit roll out. They did the same with the other crate.

"May I have a glass of water?" he asked, tipping his head toward me.

Pammy ordered, "Go on. Get him something."

"No," I said. "I won't do it."

"You'd better," she said, "or I'll tell Daddy about your diary."

"Go ahead," I said, but she gave me such a look that I said, "OK. I'll get it." I ran through the frontyard to the house, flung the door open, and ran to the kitchen. I picked up Mama's dirty glass from next to the sink. I didn't worry that it was too nice a glass for a Mexican to use. I filled the glass with water and ran back outside.

The boy was sitting in my chair beside Pammy, his arm over her shoulder, his head bent close to hers. I hurried to him. "Here's your drink," I said, thrusting the glass forward. The water splashed on the table. The boy licked his lips and said, "Thanks."

I looked down the street toward the intersection Daddy would turn from when he came home from work.

After a while, the boy said, "I should get going." He set the glass on the edge of the folding table, stood up, and pushed me out

of his way to walk to his car. He pulled away from the curb.

I punched Pammy's arm, and the motion set the table rocking. The water glass tipped and rolled to the edge of the table. I reached out, but I couldn't grab it in time, and the glass fell to the ground—Mama's crystal—shattering into rainbows.

I collected the shards and stacked them in a pile on Mrs. Garcia's table. I couldn't speak for a long time, but finally I said, "Didn't you notice that boy was Mexican?"

"I noticed," Pammy said, and she was smiling. "I think he likes me."

"No, he doesn't," I said. I realized Pammy already knew this boy, and I sensed that what Daddy was afraid of happening was going to happen to Pammy soon. "We're going to be in really big trouble," I said.

"Not me," said Pammy. She picked up an empty crate and headed for the backyard to pack more avocados. I hurried after her. "You promised you'd take my punishments from now on," Pammy said. "I'm not ever gonna get in any trouble again."

In a while, Mrs. Garcia came out to check on us. She saw the bro-

ken crystal, now a pile of rainbows, on her table and put her hand on my shoulder. She leaned close enough to whisper and before I knew it, she had her arms around me and was hugging me tight. I didn't mean to do it, but in a few seconds I was also hugging her. "Don't worry. Things will turn out OK," she said. "You must believe that."

Mrs. Garcia gathered up the broken crystal and dropped the shards into her purse. She handed me one nearly round piece. "Keep this," she whispered, "and don't ever lose it. When you look through crystal, you can see the different facets of the world. Whenever you can't bear to live in one of those facets, I want you to look through your crystal and find another. And then I want you to take a step and go into that world."

She left but came back in an hour with an unbroken crystal glass in her purse. "Here," she said, "good as new. Go on. Put this in the kitchen where it belongs."

When I looked through the crystal glass I saw one place where the glass was dull, a circle where no rainbows formed. I hid my tiny piece of crystal in my shorts' pocket, but still felt its warmth through the fabric. When I pulled out the crystal I saw the sun's reflection, red like the edge of fire.

The last of the windfall fruit began to ripen by the end of the week. Pammy warned a can of cream of mushroom soup for lunch, but I was hungry again by late afternoon. I picked up an avocado and felt its bumpy skin, then pushed in with my thumbs to check the softness. I found one I wanted and dug my nail into the skin. I peeled back a raspy slice that tickled me like a cat's tongue. The avocado was wet, lush and smooth, the devil's fruit. I put my lips to the hole I had made and stuck my tongue inside to lap up the fruit.

"Is there a game today?" Mrs. Garcia said when she came into her yard.

"Starts in five minutes," said Pammy.

"I'm going out," Mrs. Garcia said, looking at Pammy. She cleared her throat. "Is there anything else you need?"

I started to say, "No, thank you," but Pammy answered, "Yes. There is something," before I could speak.

Mrs. Garcia nodded and stared at us both for a minute before leaving.

I gripped my hands into fists. "What are you up to?" I asked.

Pammy ignored me and painted on a fresh coat of lipstick. She turned away and looked back toward the house.

Something bad was going to happen, but I didn't know if it would happen to Pammy—or to Maury—or to me.

The game started. We listened to the top half of an inning that was over one, two, three. Then commercials, then the bottom half of the inning.

"Maury Wills steps out onto the plate. And the first pitch is high and inside. Ball one."

I heard Pammy say, "Hello."

I turned and saw the Mexican boy in the sideyard.

Pammy stood and took a step toward him. "We have to hurry," she said. "I have money."

"The throw is low and Wills checks his swing. Marichal doesn't believe it and asks for a ruling. Did Wills hold up in time? Ball two!"

"Keep this," she whispered, "And don't ever lose it. When you look through crystal, you can see different facets of the world."

"Get away," I said. "Our mother is home, inside!"

Pammy took another step toward the boy.

"I won't take your punishment," I said to her. "You're on your own for this."

"Next pitch is in the dirt! Unbelievable. Marichal is wild. Baily goes over to calm him down. Two pitches into the inning and he's already out of control. The next pitch...and it's high. Wills is on with a walk!"

"Don't go," I said, but Pammy shrugged me off.

"Keep the radio," she said. "I'll come back for you soon as I can." The boy held her hand and together they walked through the sideyard, then disappeared from view.

My throat began to close and I sat stunned, afraid to stay, afraid to move. With no one out, Wills was certain to steal second. I broke into a cold sweat and tasted something sour twisting in my stomach. I stopped myself from breathing, because I was afraid my breath would blow a bad omen from my yard to Chavez Ravine, and Wills would be thrown out. The devil only knew what would happen then.

"Marichal comes out of his stretch and throws and Wills is off and running..."

Breezes gathered from all directions. Then from nowhere a gust blew strong enough to knock the radio over on its side. I moved to right the radio. "Please don't get caught," I prayed, but I didn't know who I was praying for—Pammy or Maury Wills. The winds pressed against my back and forced me upright, pushed me toward the sideyard, then into the front. My neighborhood was a ghost town, with papers and loose garbage rolling along the empty street. There wasn't a soul anywhere, no birds, no barking. The only noise I heard was of freeway traffic in the distance. I found myself running along the sidewalk away from our house toward the intersection. I pulled the crystal from my pocket and held it up. As I stared through the glass, my world became many.

Winds gusted and hot breath rushed under my heels, lifting me out of my thongs and into the air. I raised my arms and looked upward, praying I'd see heaven and not the

devil. The sky was so bright it stung my eyes. When I looked down, I saw my neighborhood had become a quilt of color, alive except for one small patch of brown.

I gripped the crystal tight and tried to imagine what Maury Wills was really like, but the man I pictured was all a blur, as if he were running past me.

Mrs. Garcia had told me not to worry, and for the first time I started to believe her. The most important thing was that Pammy had gotten free and Mrs. Garcia had given me the magic to get away when I needed to. I felt strong enough to face whatever was about to happen.

The Santa Anas winds carried me on a carpet of air that raced above the city to Chavez Ravine and the fastest man in baseball. Below, the road meandered up the dry hill, asphalt shiny as glass. I floated over the ridge of a stadium shaped like a broken bowl, where inside a thousand fans stood screaming. Something streaked across the brilliant green of the diamond and I looked down—just in time—to see Number Thirty, Maury Wills, slide free into second. ♦

*We often deny realities that we can't bear to look at too closely.
This can be quite dangerous.*

PROMISES TO KEEP

BY L. TIMMEL DUCHAMP

Illustration by Broeck Steadman

THOUGH IT'S ONLY TEN O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING, already sweat plasters her T-shirt to her body. Alyss sighs at the recollection of how as a teenager she had *enjoyed* picking cherries, how she had *begged* to be allowed to pick cherries every childhood June in her memory. For years she had felt cheated, convinced that her mother

insisted on doing all the cherry-picking herself in order to stick Alyss with less desirable chores.

Now she knows better.

A wisp of a breeze dries the sweat on her bare arms and legs, deliciously cooling them—while leaving the covered parts of her body just as hot and sweaty as before. Alyss tries to imagine the feel of a breath of air cooling her back and breasts, then, in sudden inspiration, asks herself what possible reason (beyond convention) she could have for keeping her shirt on. No one ever comes near the house, no one but her mother would ever be within sight of these trees...barring a peeper with a telescope. (*Who? Old George Crowley? And anyway it wouldn't matter, no one around here would dream of laying a finger on me. ...*)

Alyss draws her T-shirt over her head and knots it around a rung of the ladder.

Pleased at her audacity as much as at the cool wash of air flowing over her rarely exposed flesh, Alyss resumes her methodical stripping of the smooth shiny orbs in myriad shades of red, concentrating on pulling bunches rather than single cherries, without plucking too many greenies. (*Greenies? Did I really talk so nauseatingly cutesy as a kid?*) When she has plucked all the cherries within easy reach she stretches as far as she dares for those just barely accessible. She's never fallen off the ladder in all the years she's done this. But a glimpse of her breast stretching along with her arm surprises, then amuses her. Laughing, she seizes a handful of leaves on the



SHE STARES DOWN AT THE ONLY OF THE CHATTERING CL

branch she's targeted and pulls it toward her. After bracing her feet more securely she grips the branch with one hand while stripping cherries from it with the other. Cautiously she drops the cherries into her sack and takes hold of the ladder with one hand before releasing the branch with the other. Then she climbs down the ladder, drags it a few feet, and repositions it.

But as she prepares to climb back up, her mother's voice says, "Thirsty, Alyss?" from behind her.

Alyss turns. Her mother holds out a tall sweating glass of tea and ice; Alyss takes it. "Thank you."

Her mother looks amused—at Alyss's shirtlessness, no doubt. "I've collected the mail." She digs into her back pocket and pulls out a long white envelope. "Something for you," she says, holding it out.

Alyss takes it with her free hand. A glance at the return address makes her stomach drop. She looks at her mother and catches her staring. "You're going hard at it," her mother says. "I see you've almost finished with this tree. I thought you'd want a break."

"Even for June it's damned hot," Alyss says.

Her mother nods. "Maybe you'd rather leave it until early evening when it's cooler. There's always plenty of other things to be done." Alyss grimaces. "Isn't summer wonderful?"

"I didn't twist your arm, Alyss."

Mid-swallow, Alyss chokes. "I don't want to talk about it," she says when she's finished coughing the tea out of her windpipe.

Her mother shrugs and turns away.

Without looking at it again Alyss shoves the envelope into her back pocket, props the empty glass against the base of the tree trunk, and climbs back up the ladder. Ignoring the soreness already plaguing her arms, she resumes picking. The sooner she gets the trees stripped the sooner she'll stop being sore.

NIGHT CREEPS OVER THEM, INEXORABLY. ALYSS STARES OUT through the window screens at what's left of the orange streaking the sky; she sips determinedly at her gin (being fast diluted by the melting of the ice over which she has poured it). She listens to the crickets' rhythmic skree, punctuated by the equally rhythmic continuo of her mother's needle puncturing cloth through which, sighing, it pulls its thread. (*Now begins the dangerous time.*) Alyss's mouth twists, she almost laughs: anyone else would be lying back enjoying release from the day's toil. Instead she rocks harder, faster in the who-knows-how-old chair and takes another pull at her drink. Even in the close stifling heat Alyss can remember the words they flung at one another six months ago when this room's damp cold had pierced deep into her bones. "I hate this place," she had shouted at her mother. "Can't you understand that? It's like being buried alive! I'm too young to be buried alive, Mother! I'm not like you!"

Alyss slides a look at her mother, bent over the contraption she herself designed and built for managing her quilts-in-progress, but the high-intensity lamp illumines only the quilt and her hands as she wields the needle, puncturing and pulling, puncturing and pulling, in and out, on and on and on and on in a rhythm Alyss has known all her life, has felt beating deep inside her at night in her cinderblock cell of a dorm room in Urbana, beating like a secondary heart she will forever carry within her no matter how far from home she goes....

A cat yowls outside, perilously near. Alyss stops rocking; her body strains to hear. Will it be necessary to chase it away?

"Idiot cats," Jessica Woodiwiss mutters. "They don't seem to understand the way most of the other critters do." She snorts. "Betty Orville's still whispering darkly about the one she lost twenty-three years ago."

Alyss, grimacing, raises her glass to her lips. She doesn't think she can stand to hear it one more time: the story that had originally caught her attention because it had involved her mother's pregnancy with her. (*Little girls may be suckers for such stories, but not grown women, Mother.*) "Damn," Alyss says. She lifts her left ankle to her right knee and peers down at that tender patch of skin on the back of her leg just above her ankle.

"A tick?"

"Yes, of course, what else?" Alyss snaps. Light suddenly floods her ankle. Alyss looks up; her mother has angled the lamp for her. "Thanks," she says. She finds the tick at once. She pinches it between two fingers, then with her other hand unscrews the lid to the jar a quarter-filled with kerosene and drops the tick inside.

Jessica readjusts the lamp to shine on her work. "My theory has always been that people first started wearing clothing to protect themselves from Nature. And that the shame part of it came later." Her head lifts momentarily; Alyss suspects she is smiling. "But then you've always known how much sense I think most of the nonsense in the Bible makes."

"An interesting theory," Alyss says.

Jessica snorts. "Hope you didn't get sunburned today?"

"I only went barechested while picking cherries," Alyss points out. "Which means I was mostly in the shade."

The cat yowls again. Alyss's stomach tenses. And then a second cat—sounding something like an infant crying—joins the yowling of the first. "Christ!" Alyss says through her teeth.

"You aren't pregnant, Alyss, are you?"

Alyss's head jerks up; she glares through the darkness at her mother's bent head. (*I'll never inflict this kind of life on another hapless unsuspecting being, I don't care what it demands! If you'd had any guts you would have refused it at least that much!*) When she speaks, her voice is harsh. "No, Mother, I'm not pregnant. Cats don't come into this yard to mate only when a woman in this house is pregnant."

Jessica does not pursue the subject.

Alyss, drinking, thinks the one that sounds like a baby is the worst. (*Maybe it's Siamese. Don't they sound like that? Then it's probably the Gants'. Wonderful. That's all we need is back-to-the-earthier John Gant showing up to rescue his pretty little Dignity.*) Alyss stiffens. Gooseflesh crawls over her hot sweaty body. She stares down at the floorboards, aware only of the chattering clicks of its jaws and teeth. Her body trembles. It has been months since she's heard that sound; she had somehow forgotten it. She snatches at her glass (her hand shaking so violently that if the glass weren't nearly empty its contents would be sloshing over the sides) and gulps what's left of the watery gin.

"It's five days to the Full," Jessica Woodiwiss says calmly.

Alyss jumps to her feet and stumbles out to the kitchen. Dispensing with ice she pours a good two ounces of gin into her glass and lifts it to her lips. (*I can't stand this. I can't. I can't. Why couldn't I stay in Urbana, goddam it? Why?*) She gulps until her head swims. She puts her hand to the back of her clammy bare neck; she wishes she could stop her brain from thinking.

E FLOORBOARDS, AWARE ICKS OF ITS JAWS AND TEETH.

She returns to sit with her mother, of course, since to be alone is to give the slithery things creeping and crawling around the inside of her head greater opportunity for getting at her. An image of Sam's unopened letter buried beneath her underwear flashes into her mind. Determined not to think about it, she concentrates on the rhythm of her mother's needle.

"You'll have to make all the preparations yourself this Full," Jessica Woodiwiss says.

"No!"

"It's decided, Alyss."

"It, Mother? It doesn't know me, does it." (*Except before puberty. When I "helped" Mother tend it.*)

The needle stops. Alyss listens to the breaking of the thread. Another square has been completed.

Alyss sips away the rest of her gin. She's drunk enough not to care; still she feels trapped and oppressed by the vibes radiating upward from below the floorboards.

"You swore up and down you weren't coming home again," Jessica says, mentioning Alyss's change of plans for the first time.

"I'm leaving in the middle of August." Alyss flings the words like a savage challenge at her mother. "I've already told you. I'm going to law school in the fall."

Her mother does not reply. But the words she does not say nevertheless ring in Alyss's ears: *If it lets you*. Raging, Alyss jumps up from the rocker, collects another hit of gin from the kitchen, goes into the bathroom, and slams the door shut. (*I am I am I am going to law school.*) She switches on the light, blinking, she glares down at the tile floor. "I am, goddam you, I am!" And then she turns on the shower and takes off her clothes. Like all summer days spent at home, this one has been long, hot, and intolerable.

ALYSS COUNTS (SEVEN, EIGHT) AS—HOPE DYING—SHE WILLS HIM TO be stepping out of the shower or out on the back porch (*nine, ten*) on his way to the phone (*eleven, twelve*). When she's counted twenty rings she hangs up.

"Still no luck?"

Alyss shakes her head. "No. I guess he must be out for the evening." (*Unless he's already left town, intending to "surprise" me.*)

"Relax. Finish your beer," Stewart says. "Or are you in a rush to get back?"

Alyss gestures. "Hardly that. You can't imagine what it's like spending the evening watching one's mother making quilts."

"But such beautiful ones," Stewart says, gesturing at the quilt hanging on the windowless north wall. Alyss knows he bought it from the antique shop that sells her mother's quilts on consignment. "Is this some new romance?" Stewart inquires, nodding at the phone.

Alyss shakes her head. "No, it's the same guy."

Stewart whistles. "Things certainly must have heated up if you're calling him less than a week after leaving."

"Huh. The fact is—" But Alyss halts, suddenly stricken with caution. She can't let Stewart know how anxious she is to keep Sam away. (*The last man who set foot in that house was the man sent to "electrify" it. It looked like heart attack—Grandmother heaved the body into the electric company's truck and somehow managed to drive it all the way to the hospital, where he was pronounced DOA of a heart attack. But no one living within ten miles of our house believed he'd had a heart attack.*)

Women may sometimes be spared—Betty Orville, for instance—but do I want to take such a risk with Sam's life? In keeping him away I'll lose him, but at least he won't be dead on my account.) Alyss says, drily, "We're in the process of breaking up, Stewart. Only he hasn't quite realized it."

"Yet another romance bites the dust." He sighs. "How about another beer?"

Alyss watches Stewart move slowly in the heat of his tight box of a house. It must be twenty degrees cooler out on his porch, but were they to sit out there they'd be at risk of scrutiny from the neighbors, scrutiny both of them have reason to avoid. Crossing to the kitchen portion of the room, Stewart opens the refrigerator and takes two more Dos Equis from the bottom shelf. As he's levering the caps off the bottles, Alyss says, "What about your romance? Didn't you have something going with some guy in British Studies?"

Stewart returns to the table and hands her a fresh cold bottle. "Roger, you must mean. That's the only university type I've seen since moving out here." He snickers. "Honey, that's ancient history. We split up sometime last September, if I remember correctly." He reseals himself at the table, then pours most of the bottle into his empty glass. "Anyway, everybody in the boonies is running scared these days."

Alyss glances at him, but he's watching the foam in his glass stabilize. (*AIDS. That's what he means.*) She bites her lip. "The neighbors," she begins, then stops.

He lifts his eyes from his glass and looks straight across the table into her eyes. "What do I know about the neighbors? With the exception of the fair young Gants, we don't speak."

Alyss nods. She knows exactly what he's talking about. Betty Orville, the Gants, and the Crowleys are the only neighbors who don't run when they see her or her mother coming.

"It's obvious why the neighbors don't like me," Stewart says into the silence, "but I've never been able to figure out your and your mother's sin." He shakes his head. "It's a mystery. One I suppose I'll never fathom since the people who know aren't about to tell me."

Alyss gulps the cold beer. She feels hot, sticky, sweaty, smelly. The oppressiveness of it all—the weather, being home, the neighbors, the Full on its way, the necessity of running Sam off—clutches at her throat, a noose her fingers can't find the way to unknit. "We're witches, didn't you know?" she says mockingly. "Witch! other kids spat at me whenever a teacher forced my class to include me in the sports we did in physical education." (*You were going to be normal, you were going to be just like other people—it looked as if you could, no one in Urbana ever shunned you, no one there ever thought you were different. Four years of college—and then law school. That was to be it, the key to Escape.*)

"My God. As a little kid they didn't want to play with you?"

Alyss laughs. "They did everything they could to get out of having to sit next to me. Or be the one next in line to me. The main discipline problems in my classes always revolved around the things kids did to try to keep at a distance from me."

Stewart shakes his head. "How awful, how wretched for you. It's one thing when that happens to you as an adult—but as a kid! It's a wonder you're not totally screwed up!"

Alyss grins at him. "How do you know I'm not?"

Stewart smoothes little flecks of beer foam off his thick blond mustache. "Drink your beer. It doesn't help to think too much."

CAREFULLY—ALL THE WHISTENCH OF IT—SHE POURS THE CO

"Spoken like a poet," Alyss taunts. Secretly, though, she agrees with him.

ALYSS DABS HER NAPKIN TO HER LIPS. SHE HAS TO ADMIT HER MOTHER knows how to fry chicken. Leaning toward the bowl positioned halfway between them, she serves herself salad, the ingredients of which she harvested less than an hour ago.

"You remember, of course, that from midnight tonight you'll be fasting until midnight tomorrow night?" her mother queries.

Alyss fills her plate to capacity. "I'm not fasting," she says.

"You must, Alyss. You have no choice. It—"

"It can go to hell, Mother!" Alyss half-whispers through her teeth. "I don't believe in It."

"That's simply denial, Alyss. You know as well as I do that It exists. All you have to do is go downstairs and—"

"The whole thing is *nonsense*! I'm not so crazy as to throw away my life playing silly games! In my opinion we should just take it out of the cellar and let it go into the woods. Maybe at one of the lakes."

All sympathy vanishes from Jessica Woodiwiss's face: her eyes harden, her lips thin and tighten. "How can you talk like that? Do you hate the rest of the species so much that you—"

"Spare me all that *crap*!" Alyss yells in a whisper. "It's just ignorant, superstitious bullshit passed down from generation to generation. There's not a shred of evidence, not the slightest logical reason for believing those old stories! I have a life to live, Mother, even if you don't!"

"I don't know why you're bothering to whisper, Alyss. Where we are physically is irrelevant as far as It is concerned." She lays down her fork, wipes her lips with her napkin, and leans back in her chair. "Perhaps you'd like to explain in some *logical, rational* way just why it is you came back here? When you left in January you swore you would never set foot in this house again. Do you remember that, Alyss?"

Alyss's stomach heaves; she wonders now how she could have found the green beans and fried chicken so scrumptious. "You said It would never have let you go to Urbana," Alyss says. "But I went, and nothing stopped me, nothing bad happened. Not like what you've been telling me happened to Grandmother when *she* tried to leave. But *It* did let me go. It didn't stop *me*. Even though you tried to stop me by telling me I would die a horrible death if I went." Alyss swallows. Because of her mother's superstition she has had to *needlessly* live in terror. Her first three months away from home she had been convinced It would strike her down for daring to leave. But It hadn't. Her mother's panic had been irrational, hysterical.

"You still haven't said why you came back, Alyss," her mother's voice implacably hammered away at her.

"Because!" Alyss shouts, too angry to continue whispering. "Because of all the fear you've instilled in me! I *know* that's why I felt such gnawing anxiety—finally I couldn't stand it anymore, I caved in, Mother. I caved in to my own weakness. People commonly do manufacture self-defeating compulsion and anxiety." Her mouth twists. "Obviously I'm afraid of failing. Law school isn't trivial." Her voice drops. "But I have the summer to screw up my courage to go back and try it."

Jessica shakes her head. "You can't make something like this into a personal psychological problem, Alyss. It's not that simple. And deep inside of yourself you know that."

Alyss seizes the pitcher and pours a clattering stream of iced tea into her nearly empty glass. "I just told you I don't believe any of that bullshit."

"I've done a lot of thinking about Its letting you go away to college," Jessica Woodiwiss softly muses. "And do you know, Its doing that has changed some of my ideas about things. I used to think it purely a matter of taking care of It, that all of our obligations involved only It. I thought the stories about the Moon Goddess and the invocation of her in the rituals were window dressing, designed to make an ugly situation feel better to those of us forced to live with It. But I no longer think so. We've never had reason to believe It was particularly intelligent. But changing the rules a little that way—that suggests something more than just It is involved. Don't you think, Alyss?"

"Don't start that Goddess stuff with me, Mother," Alyss says. "We are not witches, we are not Goddess worshippers. Whatever it is the women in this house have been doing over the years, it wasn't practicing witchcraft or paganism." Obviously her mother's feminist Goddess-cult reading has been giving her exalted ideas about what it means to take care of It.

Jessica Woodiwiss raises her eyebrows. "Perhaps you should take a trip downstairs tonight, to remind yourself of the reality."

Alyss snorts. "The reality! To tell the truth, Mother, I have a far more important problem to deal with than debating the existence of the Goddess. You remember that letter you handed me last Monday?"

Jessica Woodiwiss nods.

"Well it's from the man I've been involved with for the last two years. He was upset at my leaving—he stormed off in a rage last Friday, he was so angry at my not giving him a straight reason for going away for the summer—and in his letter he wrote that he would be coming down here. He said he was coming down here because I'm not available by phone. Like most people he's mystified at our not having one." Alyss realizes she's getting angry again. Why *don't* they have a phone? Why can't they come the rest of the way into the twentieth century? "In his letter he gives tomorrow as the day he's coming. I tried calling him—that's why I've been over to Stewart's so often, but there never was any answer. And so last night I called a friend of his—and that friend told me Sam left last Sunday, saying he would be camping out a few days before coming here."

Instead of flying into the panic Alyss expects of her, Jessica Woodiwiss smiles sardonically. "And this upsets you? Because you'd rather not have to talk to him, to explain why you left?"

Alyss stares at her mother. "You know why I'm upset."

Her mother's smile broadens. "Do I?"

Alyss grips the edge of the table and barely manages to suppress the rage making her head explode, her body stiffen. "Does it amuse you, Mother, thinking of something bad happening to my friend?"

"I thought you didn't believe in any of what you call 'nonsense.'"

Alyss glares at her mother. "I DON'T, GODDAM IT!"

"Then I fail to see the source of your concern," Jessica Woodiwiss says calmly.

"Why believe it! Why then aren't you concerned?"

"Of course I'm concerned," her mother says. "But I'm also concerned about the level of your denial."

"At any rate I can't help tomorrow night," Alyss says. "I'll have to be watching for Sam. I'll wait by the highway. To head him off."

ILE GAGGING FROM THE LD FOAMING BLOOD INTO THE POT.

"We're hard to find even with the best of instructions," Jessica Woodwiss says. "But the point is that you must preside tomorrow night. There's no question of that. And I think you know it."

Alyss, shivering in spite of the heat, rises from the table and carries her dishes to the sink. "What about emergencies?" Sam said when she'd long ago told him they had no phone. "Aren't you worried about that kind of thing?"

"Not at all," she breezily replied. "And besides, we're so far off the beaten track it would take forty minutes for any emergency vehicle to reach us. It's just that my mother has this thing about privacy. She's really old-fashioned, you know."

"We have enough foxglove to get us through the next three Fulls, but it's getting to be time to go out collecting," Jessica Woodwiss says as she fills the sink with hot soapy water. "I think you should come with me this year, Alyss."

Alyss scrapes the scraps on their plates into the compost pail. "Why don't you call it by its real name?" she says. "Foxglove's a drug, you know. More commonly known as 'digitalis.'" (*What are should do give it a whopping big overdose. Maybe it would die if we did. Has no one ever tried that? Has no one ever thought of killing it?*)

"We've always called it foxglove in this house," her mother says. "It's too pretty a flower to be called something so ugly as 'digitalis.'"

Alyss wraps the remainder of the fried chicken in waxed paper and puts it in the refrigerator. Since she isn't fasting tomorrow it will make a most delicious lunch.

SILENTLY, RESENTFULLY, ALYSS MAKES THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE Full. She sees stars when she bends over the rabbit hutch and slips three of the fluffy white victims into the burlap potato sack. Her body isn't used to such treatment; she hasn't fasted since before menarche.

Few of the preparations bother her. Collecting the rabbits, for instance: deliberately she blocks all thoughts of *why* she is putting them into the sack, of what their fate will be. And when she collars the rooster she concentrates first on capturing the one her mother had selected, and then on making it secure.

But one preparation *does* bother her, nauseating her so violently she considers it fortunate her stomach is empty. The first thing she did that morning was take the plastic quart container of blood out of the deep freezer and put it in the refrigerator to thaw. Now when she takes it out of the fridge she finds it has thawed into a sort of crusty blood-slush island swimming in thin red water. Its odor disgusts her. But of course she swallows hard and, grimacing, dumps it into the blender container her mother keeps strictly for the monthly mixing of blood. Alyss can still remember the day her mother—deprecating her own squeamishness for caring about keeping a separate set of utensils for use in preparing for the Full—bought the second blender. If it were up to Alyss she would have a separate fridge and workspace out in the shed. She can see the point, though: whoever prepares for the Full will never be tempted on the day of the Full to prepare food in this kitchen, much less *eat* it....

As the blood-slush whirls in the blender, Alyss, standing on a chair, stretches to reach the top shelf of the cupboard above the fridge. Her head spins in redly sparking darkness as, clutching the jar of foxglove, she steps down from the chair. (*How much extra would it take? There are several Fulls' worth here. How much would it take to kill it?*) She sets the jar on the counter beside the blender. One

capful, she's supposed to use. (*That already sounds like quite a lot, at least by human standards. Its metabolism must be entirely different. Well, that stands to reason. Maybe just giving it more would be like overseasoning pasta with too much garlic or basil, giving it indigestion but coming nowhere near killing it?*)

Alyss dumps one capful of the foxglove into the blood and whirls it for a minute or so more. When she judges the blood and foxglove to be thoroughly blended (*a light frothy blood-whip, how delightful a confection, probably its equivalent of Chocolate Mousse laced with Grand Marnier*), she pulls the old earthen pot (who knows how old it is?) from the cupboard below the sink. Carefully—all the while gagging from the stench of it—she pours the cold foaming blood into the pot. When a few drops spatter onto the counter, she curses and swears and grits her teeth against the necessity of cleaning it up. After she's washed the blender jar and wiped the counter, Alyss covers the pot of blood with plastic wrap and leaves it on the counter to warm to room (*or is it body?*) temperature.

She showers, then dresses in the blood-red cotton robe her mother has laid out on her bed. This, too, is traditional. She doesn't know why they bother to shower and change—surely it would never know the difference between the cotton robe and T-shirt and running shorts. (*We must do things the way they've always been done, Alyss. There's no sense in tempting Fate.*) Alyss stares at herself in the mirror. A grin spreads over her face as she takes in the clash between her cerise hair (now growing out black at the roots) and the blood-red robe. For the last year Sam has harassed her about her choice of dye, warning her that one of the toughest professors of first year law students would specially pick on her should she go cerise-haired into his class. But her mother, on the other hand, has never seemed to notice: probably cerise hair seems no more outlandish to Jessica Woodwiss than church-going does. It exasperates Alyss no end when her mother insists she neither knows who the sitting president of the United States is, nor cares. If it weren't for her library card, her membership in the Book-of-the-Month Club and her subscription to some weird feminist Goddess-cult magazine, her mother's speech would be passed-down nineteenth-century. As it is, her notions of the outside world are pretty bizarre....

At 8:30 Alyss admits herself to be ready. (*Why am I doing this? Why am I going through this ridiculous charade? To humor her? Because when in Rome one must do as the Romans?*) She glances around the room and tidies it—putting her used underwear and T-shirt into the dirty-clothes hamper, closing her closet door. She notices her underwear drawer is hanging open; as she shuts it she glimpses the canceled stamp corner of Sam's letter...and remembers. (*Sam. What if Sam comes now, when we're in the middle of our rituals?*)

Alyss shakes her head against the possibility. She tells herself not to think about it, that it's unlikely he could ever find his way to this house in the dark. The gravel road is unmarked and few people living out near the highway would willingly admit even to knowing them, much less giving directions to a stranger on how to get here on the night of the full moon. If Sam comes it will be in the morning. There's no point in worrying about him tonight.

JESSICA WOODWISS, SIMILARLY ROBED, SITS IN THE ROCKER IN THE front room, waiting. Alyss at once notes the items her mother has placed on the round table beside the rocker: the sack of cornmeal for laying the figure, five candles in shallow earthen bowls, a bottle of

SHE LIFTS THE GOBLET HIGH, THEN MOVES WITH SLOW MAJESTY

her mother's plum brandy, the silver goblet from which they will both drink the plum brandy—and a bowl of roses. Alyss frowns at the roses: one of her mother's innovations, undoubtedly. She sighs. Their argument was so silly, Alyss couldn't take it seriously, but simply refused to learn all the questions and responses her mother tried to persuade her to interject into the ritual.

"This will be your first Full as an adult woman!" Jessica protested. "You don't have the right attitude at all!"

To which Alyss retorted: "All we're really doing is feeding some damned primordial beast that has somehow managed to survive to modern times! Why make a big deal of it?"

Her mother then reminded her of all the "facts" proving it had dark destructive powers. Pressed, Alyss asserted that every one of the "facts" could be explained as the psychological effects of superstition on Woodiwiss women. And that she for one did not propose to continue being tyrannized by those superstitions....

Alyss jumps a little when she hears it below, bellowing. "Probably," she remarks to her mother, "It's too stupid to know how to ration its rabbits. The last week must be hard for it."

Jessica, frowning, gestures at the cornmeal. "It's time to start."

Alyss swallows, draws a deep breath, and takes the sack of cornmeal from her mother. She thinks of the many botched figures she made when practicing forming them with pen on paper for half an hour in the morning, and hopes she'll get it right the first time. (What does it matter? It's only a silly game designed to make feeding it seem less barbaric.) She glances at the space from which all the furniture has been cleared and chooses the first apex of the base triangle. As she pours a smooth unbroken line of cornmeal her mother shakes a tambourine in constant steady rhythm and chanting:

Now draw me the star, powerful image of woman, birth, life, the figure of two which make five enwombing the pentagon at its heart, threshold to the Goddess's presence....

(Enwombing, Mother? Are you serious?) Alyss, beginning the second, altered triangle, takes care not to step on or smudge the lines of the first which she again and again crosses while her mother—never stopping the tambourine rhythm—intones the chant a second time.

When she's finished, Alyss steps back from her work to inspect it. The major angles are not quite uniform, skewing the five small triangles into a strange, almost sinister angularity. Still, she hasn't broken any lines and all the prescribed geometrical figures can be discerned in it. Alyss goes to the table, lights the candles and carries them one at a time to the triangles' vertices (or points, a designation which according to Mother's lecture depends upon whether you're worshipping the Goddess in two or Satan in one). In the meantime Jessica sets the tambourine and bowl of roses inside the pentagon—the "enwombed" heart of the triangles—and pours a healthy dollop of plum brandy into the silver goblet. Dramatically she lifts the goblet high and away from her body, then moves with slow majestic steps inside the pentagon center of the triangles. "Take drink," she says to Alyss.

Alyss, trying not to giggle at the all-too-resonant word, knocks back several swallows of the brandy. (Obviously the thing to do is to get drunk, then it won't be so disgusting serving it the next month's ration of food.) Her mother drinks after her—several large swallows also—then returns the goblet to Alyss. Thus fortified she bends, picks up the tambourine, and begins another chant:

O you who lived before earth took shape;

O you who are a boundless formless lightless sea; imperious to penetration by the most piercing of light and sound;

Hear me, you priestess, who keeps and preserves one of your oldest creatures.

O Triple Goddess, Dea-Triformis of the Crossways, Who blesses or curses both the goings and comings of travelers;

O Queen of Ghosts, sovereign over dead souls;

O Goddess of Storms and Destruction, of terrors of the night

O protector of those who travail in childbirth;

O controller of harvests, She who both gives life and takes it:

Hecate, hear your priestess.

Hecate, respond to your priestess now, manifest your greatness in Alyss and Jessica your Woodiwiss servants....

ALYSS SHIVERS. THE DEEPENING DUSK OUTSIDE, THE CANDLES inside, the invocation of this Hecate (of whom she has never before heard, for previously the chants had invoked simply "the Goddess of the Moon"). . . disturb her. She gulps more brandy from the goblet. Her mother takes the goblet after her, drains it to the dregs, and hands it back to Alyss, whispering a request that she refill it. Carefully Alyss steps over the lines of the figure and crosses to the round table. She dumps the rest of the fifth into the goblet. (Could we really have drunk that much already? This stuff isn't like drinking wine. It's got a kick. No wonder I'm feeling so spooked.)

When Alyss returns to the pentagram her mother kneels before the bowl of roses and gestures Alyss to kneel opposite her. Again she chants to Hecate—this time accompanying herself on the tambourine. When she finishes she again takes the goblet from Alyss and drinks. "You have to concentrate," she whispers. "Hecate can keep your friend from coming to harm. It is She who has the power to bless or curse travelers." Alyss drinks more brandy and listens to her mother chant the invocation a third time. And again they drink. And when her mother begins the fourth iteration of the invocation, Alyss, mesmerized, joins in. And when she raises the goblet to her lips she marvels at the beautiful rainbows the candles cast over the roses which she sees reflected in its shiny, smooth silver surface. Eager to share, she holds out the goblet to her mother, but her arm moves off at a tangent, missing its aim. It takes hard concentration to bring it into line with her mother's hand. And again they chant the invocation....

At the end of the sixth repetition Alyss realizes they have finished off the entire fifth of plum brandy. (No wonder I feel so... weird.) But she blinks at the rainbows arcing out over the vertices of the triangles—vivid, radiant, scintillating. "Mother!" she exclaims. "Have you drugged me?"

"Just belladonna, dear," Jessica whispers, smiling. "Such a pretty little plant, with such lovely delicate purple flowers."

Alyss knows she should be concerned. "A drug, Mother! One you're supposed to have a prescription to use!"

"A little belladonna never hurt a worshiper of Hecate. And now, shall we ask the Goddess's protection for your friend?"

Alyss closes her eyes. (I'm stoned out of my mind. Drugs and plum brandy. My God! My own mother feeding me illegal drugs!)

"What is his name, Alyss? I don't know if you ever told me."

"Sam. His name is Sam."

"Sam," Jessica Woodiwiss repeats. She draws a deep, shuddering breath.

O Powerful Goddess of the Moon ;

GH AND AWAY FROM HER ESTIC STEPS INSIDE THE PENTAGON.

*O Des-Triformis of the Crossways;
Tonight there travels a man, named Sam.
Your priestesses beg you protect him.
O Goddess Mighty Hecate;
She who blesses and curses both the goings and
comings of travelers;
Hear O Goddess your servants, your priestesses on earth,
Protect for our sake this man Sam that he may fulfill that service he shall
assist us in rendering you.*

"MOTHER! IF YOU MEAN WHAT I THINK YOU MEAN—"

"The Goddess will decide," Jessica says sternly.

"It's my body, Mother!"

"Are you going to quibble when your young man's life is in danger?"

Alyss grits her teeth. *(I should have been listening for the sound of his car—somehow I forgot. It's the damned belladonna, it's added my wits.)* "All right, all right, get on with it." What did it matter what nonsense her mother intoned? There was no way anyone was going to talk her into getting pregnant.

It bellows, and bellows, again and again and again....

(It knows; It understands. The time for going downstairs approaches.)

"I'll carry on with the chant, beseeching the Goddess on your young man's behalf," Jessica says between its outbursts. "It's time for you to make the figure of sixes and offer the sacrifice."

("Sacrifice," Mother? Since when have we glorified feeding It with such a disgusting euphemism?) But Alyss wants to get the whole thing over with. The sooner she feeds It the sooner she can get away from the weird spooky vibes of this house. Outside will be lovely, the full moon will be beautiful (especially under the influence of the pretty purple flower).

Jessica resumes chanting and thumping her tambourine. Alyss grips the plastic squeeze bottle full of blood slush and the thin flashlight in her right hand, and the sacks containing Its squirming and squawking month's ration of food in her left. Opening the door to the cellar, she recoils; Its cacophony of clicking and rattling and bellowing raises gooseflesh all over her body. She descends, shivering with the dark, creeping chill that greets her. *(It's just a primordial beast, Its power over me is the superstitious psychology Mother has inculcated in me, It is simply a beast wanting Its food Now. Nothing more. It has no special powers. It is only a prehistoric creature that mistakenly has survived to modern times. That's all. Scientists would be fascinated....)*

Halfway down the stairs she smells Its odor, a smell she once knew but had forgotten. Gagging, she chokes on her own saliva. How can she go on? The sweet, fetid foulness of It clogs her nostrils, seeps through her skin, churns her bowels. But because she must, she presses on. Suddenly, she glimpses It—and remembers, belatedly, that never, ever, has she clearly seen It. It is not the drug that blurs her vision when staring at It. She strains to distinguish the details of Its body (which according to tradition is a variation on a giant frog). Try as she might, as a child she had never been able to see It. Every time she had stared at It, her vision had blurred, her eyes had smarted. She had even, when she persisted in looking, seen double.

She wishes she could simply fling down the sacks and leave. But

first she must draw the figure of sixes in the hard-packed dirt. And then she must go upstairs, get the earthen pot of blood, carry it down the stairs without spilling it, and place it in the center of the flower-like arrangement of sixes....

Alyss coughs and swallows to get her gagging under control, then dumps the sacks on the floor and moves forward with the squeeze bottle. *(Quickly, quickly, get it over with!)* Her hands shake as they uncup the nozzle. She can't perform the ritual fast enough.

(These are the promises Mother says we must keep. Imagine a lifetime spent doing this every Full. No wonder Grandmother freaked out. Anyone would.)

"IT WORKED, ALYSS, THE GODDESS IS PROTECTING HIM!"

Screen door slamming behind her, Alyss flings herself off the porch onto the lawn and, whirling and leaping, throws herself around the yard. "He's safe, it's over, and the night is so goddam beautiful!" she shouts up at the moon. "Look at you, hanging up there in the sky, bulging silvery pregnant, untouched by it all, impervious to our folly! Whooooeee!" she shrieks, enveloping herself within a vertigo that spins the stars and moon, that shakes the earth into constant oscillation between approach and recession....

The sound of a car catches her attention. She knows that set of sounds, she recognizes that wheezing old bug engine.... Alyss runs down to the foot of the drive and stops him from turning in. "Park over there!" she shouts, pointing at the narrow verge on the other side of the road. "And be careful, there's a ditch!"

He parks and gets out of the car. In the dark she sees first his Day-glo blue T-shirt the moonlight picks out. T-shirts (apart from voting and arguing with truck drivers in bars) constitute Sam's only form of political expression. He wears his MAKE SMART KIDS, NOT BOMBBS shirt only when he's in the mood for making a point. Probably he imagines her mother will come bolting out of the house to run him off. Well, she's let him think that's why he can't come here. Obviously he's psyched himself into a rare state of belligerence....

"I can't believe I've found you," he babbles when he's two yards from her and still walking. "Once I got out of Giant City I seemed to get caught in some weird kind of loop. I swear I've been going around in circles for an hour or more." His arms close around her. "I was beginning to think I'd entered the Twilight Zone. And the weirdest thing was the fog." He stares up at the cloudless sky. "I must have imagined it."

Alyss giggles. "I'm so glad you made it," she whispers into his ear before tonguing it. Her body clamors for him; the feel of his hipbones against her thighs is driving her crazy. She draws him a little way into the yard, somehow knowing he will be safe, then tumbles him down into the grass. "Luscious, isn't it," she murmurs as she works at his fly buttons.

"Are you drunk, Alyss? You smell as if—"

"Shhh," she says, putting her fingers on his lips. "Didn't you miss me?"

"But is it safe?" he wonders. "Don't you want to get your diaphragm?"

The thought flits through her mind that it's precisely the most dangerous time of the month. But the thought doesn't stay with her more than a nanosecond. She's feeling too urgent and ecstatic to attend to anything but the moon above, the earth beneath, and Sam's body groaning and flailing beside her....

THE TALE OF THE FISH WHO LOVED A BIRD

ONCE, LONG AGO, THERE WAS A FISH who fell in love with a bird.

The people of the woods and plains tell this story, and the tale is a comedy. But in the inland they know only the small fish of the rivers and lakes, and it is quite hard to take these fish seriously, although they are good eating.

The people of the seacoast also tell this tale. To them, it is a sad and tragic love story, for in the western lands they know the great fish salmon, and respect his courage and determination.

And also the people of the sea tell this story. Since they live on the great ocean and often spend days and weeks and months in their boats without returning to their islands, they know and respect the great fish of the oceans, the fish that none who live on the lands will ever see. To them the story is neither a farce nor a tragedy, but only something that happened long ago.

A very long time ago, when the world was not as old as it now is and the animals and the birds and the fish would still talk, sometimes even with humans, a fish was in love with a bird. The fish was not an ordinary fish, but the prince of fishes, a large and marvelous fish with iridescent scales in every color and a long, muscular tail.

In the tales of the inland people, they say that the bird was a nighthawk, for (they say with a laugh) the nighthawk flies at night, and how else would something as ugly as a fish ever dare to fall in love with a bird? Surely, only in the dark, they say, and then only because a fish does not see very well in air.

The people of the seacoast say that the bird was a loon, and that the loon's forlorn cry is that of the abandoned lover, still searching for the one she loves, lost so long ago.

The people of the sea do not say what the bird was, only that she was large and graceful and beautiful and that since that time, no one has ever seen such a bird again.

In any case, it happened one day that the bird came to look at her reflection in the water, and the fish saw her, and he lost his heart to her. The fish came to her.

"You are very beautiful," he said.

The bird cocked her head to look at him with one eye. She was not used to being addressed by fish and didn't quite know what to think.

"Why, thank you, oh, silvery swimmer," she said.

"Your song is lovely."

The bird dipped her head and looked at him in surprise, for, as you know, birds never stop to think about whether their songs are lovely or plain; they just sing. And so she sang, a long trilling warble, and the fish listened.

"It is the loveliest song I have ever heard."

The bird dipped her head. "Thank you again."

"Will you marry me?"

The bird looked at him and laughed. "Marry you? How could such a thing be? I am sure you must be the ugliest thing I have ever seen. And surely you know that a bird only marries her own kind. Don't be silly."

The fish jumped high into the air. His powerful muscles flexed, and his iridescent scales flashed all of the colors of the earth and sky. When he splashed back into the water, tiny

droplets hung in the air like jewels and sparkled in the sun. "Ah," said the fish, leaping again as he swam away, "but you didn't say no."

The bird laughed again, but in her heart she was puzzled. It was true, she hadn't said no, and she didn't know why. But it was, indeed, time for her to marry, she thought, and so she called out to all of the other birds of the world to court her.

The lark came and sang a long courting song to her, but he never told her she was beautiful. The peacock came to her and spread his feathers and preened, but she could only think of the colors of the fish's scales. The magpie came and brought her a collection of stones and colored pieces of glass, but none were as pretty as the droplets of water the fish had scattered when he jumped. The rooster came and strutted and posed, but his strength was not as graceful or muscular as that of the fish. Her mind could not see any of them, only the beauty of the fish and how he had praised her song.

Troubled, she went back to the ocean, and sang her song:

Oh, beautiful fish, oh how can this be,

A bird from the skies and a fish from the sea?

We never could marry, our worlds are apart.

Then why, cruellest of fishes, have you captured my heart?

But the fish surfaced and sang back to her

BY GEOFFREY A. LANDIS
Illustration by
Janet Aulisio Dannheiser



*Beloved, my beloved, oh, do not despair
though I swim in the ocean, and you in the air.
Surely nothing and no one can keep us apart
if your love is as true as the love in my heart.
And so the fish and the bird pledged their love.*

The people of the inlands say that the nighthawk only wanted to lure the fish to the surface so she could hunt him and eat him, which she did, and that is why it is surely foolish to seek to marry one outside your own clan. But the people of the inland know little of fish, and they were not there when it happened.

The people of the seacoast tell how the fish went to Bear the trickster to ask how he could live with the bird. And they say that Bear the trickster told him that if he could swim all the way up the river to the mountains, that he, Bear, would teach the fish to fly. And the fish, too smitten with love to pay heed to caution, swam up the river, dashing over the rippling shallows and jumping up the waterfalls to be with his love. But Bear the trickster waited for him where the river was wide and shallow, and as the fish swam by, swatted him out of the water with his paw.

"There," said Bear the trickster. "I have taught you to fly." And

Bear the trickster ate his flesh and crunched his bones, and so the story is a tragedy. Even today the brave but foolish fish swim up the rivers in the spring, and the bears teach them to fly, and in the marshes and estuaries, the loon dives into the water to seek her lover the fish.

The people of the seacoast indeed know something of fish, but only of the smaller fish that spawn in rivers and not the true fish of the oceans.

The people of the sea tell a different story. They tell how the fish promised to return quickly with the secret of how they could marry. Even now, they say, if you listen very carefully, you can hear in the songs the birds sing the words that the bird told her lover as he left:

*How long will it take 'til fish swim in the air?
How long 'til birds nest in the sea?
How long before islands float up in the sky?
How long 'til you come back to me?*

The fish swam long and far, to the deepest part of the ocean, and there he found the wise old fish, who has been there since the world began, and asked him for advice.

And the wise old fish said, musingly, "sometimes, before the sunrise, at the very edge of the world I have seen the sea and the sky merge into one. If you are very determined and

can swim faster than the sunrise, perhaps you could reach that place where the sea and sky are one and live forever."

And the people of the sea say that the flying fish are brothers of the prince of the fishes, and that the penguins are the bridesmaids of the princess bird. They tell how the fish and the bird swam and flew to the very edge of the world, where the islands float upon the sky instead of the water and the moon dips down to touch the water every night and every morning. And beyond the edge of the world, on a day when the sky merges with the sea, they swam into a realm beyond both sea and sky, where they still dwell today.

The island people know that this is true, they say, for if you sail out into the ocean beyond any of the breezes from the land, you will still see flying fishes; and if you paddle south past the warm islands and past the cold rocky islands where no one lives to where islands are made of ice and float, you can still find penguins, which are graceful birds that fly through water and not in air. And, even today, before the sunrise you can sometimes see the place at the very edge of the world where the sea and sky merge. And, they say, if you paddle your canoe faster than the sunrise, you can go there and live forever.

If you don't believe it, why don't you just try it and see? ♣

THE PAINTER PAUL KLEE ONCE WROTE, "ART does not reproduce the visible, it makes visible." Painter and illustrator Stephen T. Johnson has spent a good part of his career making visible fantastic worlds inhabited by snow demons, sea serpents, animated nutcrackers,

Christmas ghosts, and other denizens of myth, legend, folk tale, and fairy tale. Even when, as in his book *Alphabet City* (Viking),

the focus is on the apparently mundane scenes of urban life, the artist challenges the viewer to look beneath the surface, to discover the unfamiliar in the familiar, to see what lies behind the obvious, within the shadows—in short, to experience the invisible made visible.

I became acquainted with—and an instant admirer of—Steve's work when he agreed to illustrate my adaptation of a medieval Japanese legend, *The Samurai's Daughter* (Dial). From the first I was struck by his ability to bring alive (here using pastels) the character of our heroine Tokoyo and her world, and infuse each painting with crackling drama, action, and emotion. There is heartbreak in the separation of father and daughter, desperate courage as Tokoyo battles a sea-serpent, and tenderness in the reunion of parent and child. Steve's painterly illustrations have

a stand-alone quality, yet together they define consistent, fully realized worlds in which the viewer is fully immersed.

As an illustrator, Steve strives for a simplicity and directness. "I look for emotional and compositional strengths in a picture," he says. "I'm wary of too much detail—always trying to balance the necessary visual information with the harmony of the whole."

The Samurai's Daughter was so successful, that the publisher quickly reunited us on a second book, *The Snow Wife* (Dial), which was a retelling and expansion of a story from Lafcadio Hearn's ghostly collection, *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*. Using a palette favoring pink, gray, peach, and blue, Steve gives form to the beautiful/deadly woman of the snows, the monstrous mountain man and mountain woman, and the awesome god of winds. One reviewer praised Steve's "marvelously subtle colors, mysterious light, and extravagantly imaginative portraits."

In a relatively short time (he graduated from the University of Kansas in 1987), Steve has produced an impressive body of work that includes covers for *Time* and *Forbes* magazines, illustrations for *The New Yorker*, and the paintings for a variety of books, including *The Nutcracker*, *When Solomon Was King*, and *A Christmas Carol*. His work has won numerous awards, and has been featured in such prestigious exhibitions as the Society of Illustrators Museum in New York City, the Pastel Society of America, and many others. To all his works—and to his fantasy works in particular—he brings a unique sensibility.

When asked about influences upon his work, Steve notes that, as a child, he was attracted to the classic work of such artists as Arthur Rackham (an illustrated edition of Wagner's *Ring* from his father's library was a favorite), Heinrich Kley, and the French

*The enchanted art of
Stephen T. Johnson
embraces creatures of light
and darkness—and all the
colors in between.*

OUT OF MISTY DREAMS

BY ROBERT D. SAN SOUCI

The graceful folds of the kimono of "The Snow Wife" contrast with the wild, swirling dark hair and with the void in which she floats—a disturbing suggestion of the dark forces that invigorate this chilling figure.





classical and romantic painters of the nineteenth century. Another artist who made a strong impact on the budding artist was the American painter Edwin Austin Abbey (1852-1911), who illustrated works of Herrick, Goldsmith, and Shakespeare.

In his teens, he went through a "Frank Frazetta phase," being impressed by the artist's ability to render scenes of sword and sorcery that are strong, consistent, compelling. There is, he feels, a synergy about Frazetta's work that draws all the elements together in a visual statement more than the sum of its parts. Frazetta, he feels, is one of the first-rank fantasy artists whose illustrations are organic—a far cry from works that are all-too-evident hodge-podges of anachronistic details, posed models, and props—lacking a unifying artistic vision.

The grandson and son of talented painters, Steve grew up in Lawrence, Kansas, where he later attended the University. During his early years, he lived intermittently in France. He was captivated by the costumes, settings, grandeur, scale, and heroic idealism of Napoleonic period painters. Though gifted with a facility for drawing and a love of the visual arts, he did not seriously consider a career as a fine artist/illustrator.

But, while at college, he had the opportunity to study for a year at the Conservatoire des Beaux-Arts and the Université de Bordeaux. Profoundly influenced by his grand-



father's charcoal life drawings in the academic manner, he used the time to teach himself this style, which had fallen out of fashion. "That was the turning point," he says. "My teachers in France thought it was sort of amusing that this kid wanted them to drag out all of the old drawings that no one wanted to look at anymore." For all their bemusement, they complied, and showed him how to teach himself drawing in the academic tradition. Steve copied works of some of the masters, developing his own artistic "vocabulary."

He also found himself drawn to symbolist artists of the latter nineteenth century whose works were imaginative, intellectually rich, sensual, and filled with mystery and a willingness to probe the emotional aspects of human existence. Study of these artists, who set the stage for art nouveau and expressionism, gave him new techniques and new creative avenues to explore.

These sources are not the usual ones for a fantasy illustrator; but then, Steve is no garden variety artist. One of Steve's highly praised early pieces shows a face that descends into something quite abstract. "My better work is a blend of the abstract and the real," he explains. "This leaves something for the imagination."

Such means of engaging the viewer is echoed in Steve's vision of the yuki-onna, the snow wife, taking shape out of swirling mist and darkness. She is beautiful: the surface

image is a lovely woman rendered in pastels. But her eyes express devastating coldness, a supernatural, terrifying power that is one with the matrix of unearthly energies that sustains her.

The French painter, Odilon Redon (1846-1916) also proved influential. Redon's famous pastel, *Cyclops* (1898) provides a naturalistic rendering of the monster (reflecting the artist's grasp of the laws of natural science) that balances the fantastic landscape. Similarly, in the Mountain Man illustration from *The Snow Wife*, Steve's detailed creature—red fur, swollen belly, cunning expression—is set against the pastel never-neverland of a mythic mountain slope.

While still at the University of Kansas, Steve impressed his teacher with a series of three paintings that unfold the tale of *Beauty and the Beast*. For this early fantasy extravaganza, he dressed models in costumes borrowed from the theater department. "I got so caught up in the folds of [Beauty's] dress," Steve recalls, "that the painting seemed to take forever."

When he graduated, Steve headed for New York City to look for work illustrating. He ultimately settled in a "typical" Brooklyn brownstone. His high-ceilinged studio is walled in bookcases and comfortably cluttered with canvases, flat files, foam-core—the necessities of a working artist.

The walls also display nude studies. When his hectic schedule permits, Steve takes life-

ABOVE: In this illustration from *"The Samurai's Daughter,"* details reveal a subtext. The father's outstretched hand can be read as pleading, apologizing, temporizing. Tokoyo's hands reveal strength of purpose: one holds her servants in check, while the other, held under her chin, suggests that the quick-witted heroine is contemplating a plan of action. **TOP LEFT:** The dark side of holiday dreams: the *Nutcracker's* soldiers do battle with the Mouse King's army in *"The Nutcracker Ballet."* **FAR LEFT:** The Mountain Man, one of the grotesque creatures the hero of *"The Snow Wife"* encounters as he struggles up the slopes of Bitter Mountain, searching for the wife who has been snatched away from him.

drawing classes with other artist friends. "In the illustration field, we sometimes have a tendency to over-rely on photographic references due to time constraints," he explains. "The classes let me get back in tune with living, breathing subjects; they help me refine my drawing skills, freed from the strictures of a storyline and an editor's or author's expectations; they give my work added vitality."

Steve balanced our joint forays into legendary Japan with illustrations for *The Nutcracker Ballet*, retold by Melissa Hayden and *A Christmas Carol*, adapted by Donna Martin (both books published by Andrews and McMeel). To each, he brings a unique sensibility while retaining traditional elements.

One of my personal favorites from the



LEFT: From *A Christmas Carol*, the Ghost of the Future rises from the mist of as-yet-unlived time. RIGHT: The world of ancient Israel seems real, apprehensible in this emotion-charged scene from "*When Solomon Was King*." Here the compassionate young Solomon kneels beside the wounded lioness in sympathy, his expression echoing her pain.

book is the ominous appearance of the Ghost of the Future. Steve shows a dark-shrouded figure that seems to be rising out of the curiously underlit mist that clings to its robe—a nightmare shaping itself out of the amorphous mass of as-yet-unlived time, the shapelessness of things to come. Tall, thin, angular, the figure seems as mysterious and powerful as a menhir, framed by the dark facades of buildings grown surrealistically narrow and high, allowing only a tiny glimpse of sky—moonless, starless, unnaturally gray.

The contrast of light and shadow is carried forward in Steve's images from *The Nutcracker*. Note the memorable scene of Clara and the Nutcracker's soldiers, their rifles at the ready, facing the monstrous mice—minions of the hateful Mouse King. Clara in white nightgown and the soldiers, with their pale breeches, sashes, and cockades, and the light gleaming along their rifle barrels, oppose the mice, painted in dark shades, so that they seem part and parcel with the shadows, the dark side of this holiday dream.

When Solomon Was King (Dial), written by Sheila MacGill-Callahan, provides Steve the opportunity to recreate in watercolors and pastels the biblical world of King Solomon. Here the focus is on a handful of human and animal characters in a story that builds upon the Jewish tradition that Solomon's ring enabled him to talk with animals. The for-the-most-part wilderness settings are deliberately vague, allowing for extreme "close ups" of human and non-human features—all richly characterized in this fanciful and touching tale of interspecies understanding and compassion.

When given a text to illustrate, Steve says, "I first read the story several times. I try to get the emotional aspect out of it—to find what moves me about particular scenes and the work as a whole." He tries to get as much meaning as possible into his pictures, because this makes the images enduring and able to stand on their own—even apart from a given text. Like the symbolists and other masters whose work inspired him, Steve strives to create multilayered images. Frankly considering his best paintings, he says, "You can read them on so many different levels.

They're pretty pictures for those who want them to be, or much more."

Steve constantly sets himself new challenges in all areas of his art. "His style," one critic noted, "runs from the realism of old Dutch masters to art nouveau fantasy to near total abstraction." It is his boast that he has, so far, been able to avoid falling into any stylistic traps. Some years back, he commented, "Art's fun. Try everything and have a good time." With each new painting or sequence of illustrations, he follows his own advice. And his willingness to push the envelope, to draw upon a wide variety of techniques, allows him to continue to produce works that draw the reader into other worlds, created out of watercolor, pastel, or charcoal—infused with imagination, emotion, wit, and mystery. Here are works that viewers can turn to again and again, discovering deeper layers of meaning, wonder, and profound enjoyment.



And next? First, there's Steve's pet project, *Alphabet City*, due out this fall. This bracingly original variation on traditional alphabet books consists of 26 exquisitely painted views of urban landscapes that reveal each letter in unexpected places: G, the curve of an ornate lamppost; I, a faded sign with a cryptic legend of mottled word-fragments, jutting from a facade into a cloudy evening sky. These visionary renderings hint at the sense of mystery that lies beneath the veiling of the familiar. He has completed the paintings for *The Tie Man's Miracle* (Tomorrow), written by Steven Schnur, a Hannukah tale geared with loosely delicate watercolors.

A selection of Steve's paintings from *A Christmas Carol* are currently featured in *The Art of Enchantment*, an exhibit running until March 24, 1996 at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. ■

Hobbits are even smaller, and more fun than you think.

WHenever I sit down to write fantasy, I can't help but think about *The Hobbit*. Back in high school, my thoughts usually turned to how I could write something *just* like *The Hobbit*. By the time I got older (a disgusting amount older) and began to sell a few books of my own, my obsession had become how to write something *nothing* like *The Hobbit*. I didn't want to be a perceived as yet another hack trying to make living by knocking together some pale imitation of the original.

These days, I know better. Old J. R. R. got his shots in too early and they penetrated too deep. For good or for bad, everything I write is affected to some extent by those stumpy little guys with the hairy feet. Maybe I should have given in from the start—a lot of folks have made a much better living than me by imitating authors far worse than Tolkien.

My literary obsessions aside, Tolkien's little fantasy travelogue has had a reach wider than all Middle Earth. For many people, Tolkien's books are fantasy. For these folks, their only conception of the genre is tied up with elves, and dwarves, and all things orkish. This vision of fantasy has certainly had a huge effect on the gaming

industry. From role-playing games to computer adventure, to strategy contests, the shadow of Mordor lies over all. The names are often changed to protect the nominally innocent, but when it comes to the true inspiration of much gaming material, there is little doubt.

Amid all the clones, there is one company that has the pipeline to the pure stuff. For years, Iron Crown Enterprises has been creating authorized games based on Tolkien's work. ICE's *The Lord of the Rings Adventure Game* provides a simplified, easy-to-use gaming system that's very suitable for role-playing novices. The main volume for this system is well-written and supported by a handful of campaigns that are all crafted with the beginner in mind. For more advanced players, they offer *Middle-earth*, a complete role-playing system that's been growing quite quickly since the introduction of a new version last year. But Iron Crown's latest Tolkien-related product is not a role-playing game at all. ICE has brought *The Hobbit* to a new form—one that is rarely seen these days—the board game.

For many people, the last board game they played was *Monopoly*. Certainly many fantasy gamers tend to grow about fourteen more sides on their dice as they get older, moving on from board games to role-playing and strategy. Board games, with their fixed paths and limited objectives, can seem a little shallow in comparison. But there's more to the board game than getting a hotel on Park Place. With the right design elements, a board game can still provide a satisfying, convincing experience.

The Hobbit Adventure Board Game is played on a map of western Middle-earth. Represented by a one inch tall plastic hobbit (hey, I thought they were taller, too), each player attempts to evade monsters, find treasure, and eventually make their way to a final battle with a certain nasty dragon. Note that this doesn't necessarily mean running the beast through with your trusty sword. From the books, it's clear that those tricky hobbits have come up with more than one way to best a beastie. That holds true here, as well. Sometimes the best way to win a fight is not to fight.

Winning the ultimate conflict with the dragon means winning the game, but you can't just role the dice and hope to get there first. If you want to survive your encounter with the dragon, you'll need to pick up a considerable amount of experience and equipment first.

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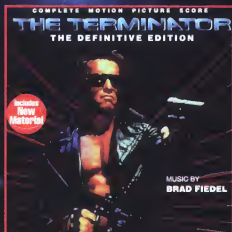
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paths of the game board, stopping at places which contain treasures or dangerous creatures, villages (human, dwarf, or hobbit), or other interesting places. All of these encounters are decided through the use of eight decks of cards and a handful of dice. But it's not nearly so simple as pulling out a chance card and heading for go.

Riddle cards present players with a uniquely Tolkien-esque challenge—a riddle duel. When two players land in the same place, they are subject to this contest which awards a piece of equipment or treasure to the winner. Winning a duel involves having a card that itself contains the solution to the riddle with which you're presented. Not sitting down to puzzle out the riddle itself is a bit disappointing. When I first saw this feature in the game I had looked forward to some good headscratches. But if the duels had really been tackled by puzzling out the riddles, the game would have soon needed more cards than *Trivial Pursuit*.

When landing in a place of danger, the player is likely to encounter orcs, trolls, and other unsavory types. Combat with these creatures can be surprisingly complex, approaching the kind of sophistication usually reserved for role-playing. Your hobbit can carry weapons and shields. He (all the little figures look male to me) also can train at a village to become a master of that weapon. Potions can be used to increase combat skills, or heal wounds. Results of combat are calculated by lining up a hobbit's equipment, rolling a set of combat dice, and checking the information on the creature's card. Lose a battle and you lose hit points, here called life points. Lose enough battles, and you'll never make it to the dragon's lair.

In general, it's nice to see this kind of attention in a board game. Combat is rich, but not too difficult for a beginner to grasp. The only flaw lies with the combat dice. Rather than being regular dice or the multisided dice that role-players are used to, these are a sort of hybrid. Figuring the result of a dice roll involves doing enough math that a round of combat can leave you wishing for a calculator. If there is one thing that stops younger kids from enjoying the game, this is it. Even adults can become frustrated after rolling four or more dice and making a two-step calculation.

With its complex combat system and variety of encounters, *The Hobbit Adventure Board Game* has the feel of a simple role-playing game grafted to a board. Life points are marked by small tokens. So is wealth. So are magical talismans. Equipment, training, potions, and more are shown by cards that the player holds onto. While there is no paper and pencil, you'll have no lack of things to keep track of.

The physical game is mostly well-crafted. The board is sturdy, and the map of Middle-earth is well-drawn. The hobbit figures are nicely done, as are the cards and tokens.

When you really get down to it, this is a board game. You do have a lot more influ-

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ence over your course than in a game like *Monopoly*, but random chance is more important to your success here than your acting ability or knowledge of arcane rules.

And that's the good part. You can play this game with only two people. You don't need a DM. You can finish in an evening. You don't need a month of your life to see the campaign to the end. You can learn to play in ten minutes. You will not create your own character, pour over rule books, and still get into arguments over 'paragraph 8, subsection a.'

It may not change your life, but I think you'll find it fun. Remember fun? Put up the heavy game manuals for a night and play *The Hobbit Adventure Board Game*. I'm sure the hobbits would want it that way.

Warcraft: Orcs vs. Humans (Blizzard)

Those orcs, they sure do get around. They show up as badies in most every role-playing game, make a stopover in collectable card games, and now they've gone digital. In Blizzard Entertainment's recent computer game, *Warcraft: Orcs vs. Humans*, those tusk-toothed ruffians have invaded a human kingdom, and they've come to stay.

This game manages to combine elements of "god games" like Bullfrog's *Populous*, with the strategic warfare of a combat game. The whole package has been wrapped up neatly with well-done cinematics, nice music, and some peachy special effects. Best of all, it's one of the first games of its kind that does a

really solid job of supporting two players over a modem.

In a plot that's equal parts Tolkien and Feist, the orcs have found a rift in space that allows them to cross from a world where they dominate into the heart of a human kingdom. There, they wreck villages, loot, pillage, plunder, and generally go about trying to take over. Hey, if you're going to steal, steal from the successful.

When playing the game solo, you have a chance to play on either the side of the humans or the orcs. The differences in the groups are some of the best features of the game. Human villages look fairly traditional, with stables, barracks, town halls, wizard's towers, etc. The orcs have a decidedly different approach to architecture. Most of their structures have rounded walls, with houses that look like mud igloos and temples that resemble a darker version of Stonehenge.

You'll have to direct peasants (called "peons" on the orcs side) to build most of the structures that you need. Barracks allow the training of foot soldiers. Add a sawmill, and you can produce archers, as well as research improvements on your bow. Add a blacksmith and you can make the powerful catapult, or learn how to make more powerful swords and shields. Tack on some stables and you have mounted knights. Finally, churches allow you to train clerics and stone towers give you wizards.

Each of these units has a rough equivalent

on the orcs side. Grunts are the equals of footmen, and spear throwers match up with archers. The orcs' clerics and warlocks have different spells than those of the human. Where a human cleric can learn to heal the wounded, the orcs can raise the dead into skeleton warriors. Where human wizards can learn the powerful rain of fire, warlocks can send an acid cloud drifting over human troops and structures. The two sides are matched evenly, but knowing how to apply the different abilities in combat is essential to success. Even in the sounds they make, these units are nicely handled. Clicking on a human unit gives a response of a polite "My Lord?" Tapping an orc gets you a brutish grunt.

The various battles in the game are tied into a pair of story lines—one for the orcs, another for the humans—which give a sense of progress from battle to battle. The first encounters are simple learning affairs which gradually introduce the various structures and units and give you a chance to get acquainted with the game system. Later, you'll run into more and more difficult situations—often ones in which you're outnumbered and undersupplied. If you haven't learned a little generalship by the time you hit the sixth or seventh mission, you'll be treated to the sight of orcs battering your village to the ground.

You'll have to learn a few skills to run your troops correctly. Footmen are stronger on a blow-by-blow basis than archers, but massed

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archers can focus their fire on a single unit, often destroying it even before it reaches your line. Knights can outrun most units, and can be used to draw enemy units into an ambush. Catapults move and fire slowly, but their flaming missiles can bring down whole racks of opponents.

When playing against the computer, you soon find that the biggest failing of the artificial intelligence is an inability to marshal a large force and keep it together in the field. The computer's constant, small attacks can be deadly if you haven't built up your defenses, but given time to breathe, it's almost always possible to assemble a strong force and march into the village victorious.

If you start to get too confident, tap a few keys and use the modem to call another player. In a move worthy of any number of plaudits, Blizzard has made it possible for two players to engage in modem play by buying only a single copy of the program. You don't have to talk a friend into investing \$50 of his or her own money before you both get down to hack and slash. Playing the game against another human is like playing a completely different game. The unpredictability of humans is far beyond silicon's ability to mimic, and even the best general against the computer can find himself or herself brought up short by an opponent with a few neurons on his side.

This game has almost everything going for it. Graphics, sound, gameplay, story. Even the animation of the peasants at work and units in fighting scenes is dead on. Everything works together to make a really fine gaming experience.

There are some frustrating factors, however. You only can maneuver four units at a time, making it hard to control a larger force in the field. Catapults can't lead moving opponents and are always hitting the ground behind units on the march. Knights get too anxious and charge off without orders (But then, don't they always?). Getting a village started, especially in the early scenarios, can be something of a tedious process. Once you've learned the basics, it would be nice to have the option to start the scenario a little further in.

By the time this review is in your hands, *Warcraft II* should only be a month or two away from the shelves. Blizzard is promising snappy SVGA graphics with 3-D rendered creatures and structures. They're adding allied races, boats, balloons, new structures, and more. Just seeing the preview screens is enough to make me stand outside the software store with a credit card in hand. With *Warcraft* and its upcoming sequel, Blizzard Entertainment has positioned itself right at the front of the pack for fantasy war games. Even if you never met a war game that you liked, take a look at this one.

I.M. Meen (Simon & Schuster Interactive).

Quick, what's the most dreaded word in computer games? What one word can send any true gamer fleeing in fear. Multimedia?

No. Full Motion Video? Uh, uh. Interactive? [shudder] No. Worse than all of these is... edutainment.

The mad concoction of some twisted PR rep, the word edutainment is almost a guarantee that the product to which it's been attached will be found neither entertaining nor educational. Often, they are excuses to stamp mindless "reward" animations onto almost equally mindless drill and practice exercises. But somewhere, somehow, you just knew someone had to come up with something both worth playing and worthwhile. Simon and Schuster Interactive has managed the trick.

I.M. Meen is based around a first person shooter, something not too far from games like *Doom* and *Heretic*. Those shoot-'em-up type games are only likely to teach you when to duck, while *I.M. Meen* has a nicely integrated set of grammar lessons.

In animations that are as good as anything on the PC, you'll learn how *I.M. Meen* has imprisoned children within the labyrinths of his magic book. Their only hope for freedom lies in your character going inside and bringing them out. To do so, you'll thread your way through 3-D mazes and knock heads with a wide assortment of creatures from bats to vampires, and trolls to spiders. Every now and then, you'll find your way blocked by a magic scroll. This is where the educational aspect comes in. The scrolls, you see, all contain instances of broken grammar or bad punctuation. To get to the next part of the maze, you have to correct these problems.

You can get some illicit help from *I.M. Meen's* gnomish companion. His face acts as a little animated emblem on the scroll, and he'll give you what tips he can. Both the combat and the scrolls start out as pushovers, but the deeper you go into the maze you'll find both the enemies and the English getting tougher.

The game has enough ick-factor to satisfy the kids without becoming a gorefest. And the educational content is not only real, but on a topic rarely addressed in software. The overall gameplay is good enough that adults will be tempted to try (let me know if you get past the Dracula clones). There's also a nice understanding that both girls and boys will be playing, and both male and female on-screen characters are available.

Perhaps best of all, in a day when every new game seems to require an upgrade in hardware, this game actually runs very well on the minimum requirements shown on the box. In fact, I cheated and ran this game on a slower system with only an old single-speed drive. Performance was still more than adequate, with only a few frames of the animation missing.

If you have a kid between third and sixth grade, this piece of edutainment actually lives up to the buzzword. If you don't have the kid, lie to the guy at the software store. How else are you going to get all those captive children free? **A-**

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A MATTER OF HONOR

Continued from page 55

him shout with fear when he attempted a simple maneuver I've seen the youngest Y'agha do with ease?"

"That is true," someone said from the crowd. "But..."

"There can be no buts," I cried. "Y'agha, kneel before your king!"

The winged ones looked at each other, and I knew they had another trait in common with birds, being not overly gifted with reasoning. Tograh was the first to go to his knees.

I see my time is running out, so I must bring this to a close.

It was a simple matter, after a day or so, to have another sorcerous vision which revealed the Y'agha should be ruling themselves, as they had before the Carns appeared, and their new ruler was yet unborn.

I chose Tograh's daughter to become queen, and announced her wings were to be left untouched, as were the wings of every female child born from this day forward.

Otherwise, I said, I would cast even greater magic. If I could give flight to Zuan Carn, I could surely deny it to all the Y'agha, and then they would be no more than the beasts of the village below the castle, and doomed.

A week later, using all of the nets and the Y'agha people, I gathered a portable amount of their treasure, and we flew south.

We crossed over the mountain peaks of the giants, then over the desert, and I fancied I could see small dots that would have been a tribe of the Adigrat below me.

My Y'agha set me down just beyond the first settlement we came to, and helped me hide my treasure.

I bade them farewell, saying I trusted they would find new ways of peace, and if they didn't, I would curse them from afar. But if they held to the ways of good, such as their new queen would devise, they would always be able to call on me in their hour of need and I would return.

They rose into the sky, like a cloud of bats returning to their dark cavern at sunrise, and I saw them disappear into the north.

I sighed and started for the settlement to hire bearers and guards for my return to Jeypur.

This trip was interesting. I can now devise a plan to encourage the desert nomads to lust after the fine things they so easily gave in to, which will mean they must give up their brigandage and cannibalism; and once their district is peaceful I shall mount an expedition into the land of the giants. There is always a market for fine weapons in these times, and the giants are a completely virgin territory.

So, my Omerye, your husband is returning to you, an ex-victual, ex-slave, ex-magician, ex-king, yet with his "honor" still intact. Whatever that may be.

Counting the moments until I hold you.

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TULI

Continued from page 43

outside the window.

The wind stopped. The shutters and the painting grew still. The small flame in the bronze oil lamp burned straight up.

In the sudden silence, Tianfeng looked at the helmet, leather tunic, leggings, and boots lying on the floor, clear of dust. He glanced out the window where the full moon shone down on the quiet streets. Then, at last, he fell back against the wall with relief.

TIANFENG KNEW HE COULD NOT SLEEP THAT night. After a while, he lit the incense again. Before his own rendering of the patient, gently smiling Guanyin, he prayed for the spirit of Tuli, son of Mongke Khan, and gave thanks for her mercy.

As the flame in the oil lamp slowly burned down and the moon lowered in the sky, he carried all of Tuli's clothing but the helmet outside to the incinerator. Pouring oil on the clothes to speed their passing, he burned them in the summer night. Then he came back inside and placed the helmet on his desk.

When dawn arrived, Widow Li rose to prepare his morning meal. Tianfeng said nothing to her of demons and washed in a basin as usual. Then he brought Tuli's helmet out of the room and set it on the dining table where he could see it.

Widow Li gave the helmet a curious look but said nothing. As she did each morning, she left the west window shuttered. She opened the east window to the sunrise.

As Widow Li placed tea and steaming rice gruel before him, Tianfeng saw through the window that a courier from the palace was approaching the house. At his gesture, Widow Li met the courier at the door. She brought a small hand scroll inside.

Puzzled, Tianfeng unrolled the scroll and sipped his tea as he read it.

Scholar, I lack the skill of writing, so I am dictating this to a palace scribe early in the evening. Soon I will return to your home in person, but I shall order this delivered tomorrow morning. I am trusting, scholar, that we shall seek death together tonight.

If you find death with me or without me, this note shall go undelivered.

Be aware, scholar, that Kublai Khan favors his nephew, and has granted two requests. If you are alive to read this in the morning, then know that the mentor you seek, Zhao Mengfu, awaits your visit this day in his office at the order of the Khan. Do not fail him. Know also that Princess Bourtai awaits a formal introduction from you, by permission of the Khan. Do not fail her.

I seek death because I suffer truly. You, scholar, now have no excuse. Signed Tuli, son of Mongke Khan.

Tianfeng lowered the scroll.

In the morning sunlight, the lacquered leather helmet shone and the horsehair tuft swayed slightly in the breeze. ♦

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Contributors.

BORN IN DETROIT, MICHIGAN, **Geoffrey Landis** has since moved fourteen times, and gets terribly confused when people ask him where he's from. He won the Hugo Award for best short story in 1992 for the story "A Walk in the Sun," and the Nebula in 1990 for "Ripples in the Dirac Sea." He is the author of one short story collection *Myths, Legends and True History*, published by Pulphouse Press as number 26 of their *Author's Choice Monthly* series. He currently lives in Cleveland with two calico cats and twenty-six goldfish. In addition to writing, Dr. Landis works on solar energy research at NASA Lewis Research Center. His current project is to develop instruments to fly on an upcoming unmanned probe to Mars.

William F. Wu has the upcoming fantasy short stories "On the Sun and Moon Mountain" in *Ancient Enchantresses* and "The Ginseng Potion" in *Warrior Enchantresses*, anthologies edited by Kathleen M. Massie-Ferch, and "The Spirit From the Ninth Heaven," in *Phantoms of the Night*, edited by Martin H. Greenberg.

Wu may be best known for his contemporary fantasy short stories, such as "Wong's Lost and Found Emporium," a multiple award nominee that was adapted into an episode of the revived *Twilight Zone*. His first fantasy novel, a collaboration with Michael A. Stackpole, will appear from HarperPrism; the title is not set.

According to the oral tradition in his family, one of his ancestors married a princess of the Yüan Dynasty, perhaps as described in "Tuli, Prince of the Mongols." If this is true, he is descended from Genghis and Kublai Khan. While he has not razed any cities lately, he does live in a desert; he is divorced and now lives in the Mojave Desert north of Los Angeles.

Mary O'Keefe Young's illustrations have appeared in eight children's books, greeting cards, magazines and ads. Her newest book, *Helen and the Hudson Hornet* came out in the spring of 1995. Painting fantasy portraits is her passion.

Leslie What attended Clarion in 1976 and has published fiction in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Hysteria*, and several regional

publications. She's a columnist and contributing writer to the *Eugene Weekly*.

Paul Salmon, an award-winning illustrator, has created graphic arts projects for such clients as the Smithsonian, NBC television, *National Geographic*, *Time/Life Books*, NASA, American Forces Press and Publication Services, and numerous government agencies. He is a frequent contributor to *Air & Space Smithsonian Magazine*. He was a participant in the Smithsonian Exhibition entitled *The Artist and the Space Shuttle*, and his work is now part of the permanent collection at the Kennedy Space Center. In 1989 he was awarded the Virginia Commonwealth University Alumni Award in the Design Arts.



Leslie What



L. Timmel Duchamp

L. TIMMEL DUCHAMP'S FICTION HAS appeared in a variety of places, including *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Full Spectrum 4*, and *Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine*. She lives in Seattle and enjoys hiking in what is left of the Old Growth forest of this continent. Her great quest these days is delta-wave sleep.

Brock Steadman seems on the verge of becoming the King of Young Adult cover art. He has contracted for twelve covers for R.L. Stein's new series *The Children of Fear Street*, and is currently working on the first volume, *The Beast*. He recently completed a set of matching covers for Bruce Coville's series *The AI Gang*. Both of these will be appearing from Pocket Arkway.

Chris Bunch was for fifteen years paired with Allan Cole, with whom he did the very successful *Far Kingdoms* trilogy for Del Rey, as well as other books. He has just agreed to write a fantasy trilogy entitled *The Seer King*. He's done some short fiction for a magazine called *Harsh Mistress*.

Eric Niderost teaches U.S. history in California, but his passion is movies. His interests include Golden Age films as well as contemporary ones. He has written about movies for a number of publications, and has interviewed such stars as Vincent Price and Melanie Griffith, and many others. Not content with only viewing films, he also has been an extra in some sixty TV and movie productions.



Geoffrey Landis



William F. Wu

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